

CHAUCER'S ARTHURIANA

BY

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## ABSTRACT

I trace Chaucer's increasingly complex use of the Arthurian legend, building on the work of Charles Muscatine and William Calin. In his early dream visions, Chaucer largely mirrors his Italian and French sources; however, his use of Arthurian allusions diverges from the French tradition in order to reflect the negative attitude found in fourteenth-century England towards the Arthurian myth. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer reveals the extent to which he is indebted to the French tradition by using Lancelot as a model for his character of Troilus. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer shifts direction, exploring the extent to which the Arthurian legend permeates fourteenth-century English society. Thus he critiques the attitudes of the clergy, who reject the legend while citing its lack of a moral message, and the aristocracy, who use the legend to establish a superficial superiority. At the same time, through his invocation of the popular figure of Gawain in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer displays the flexibility of the Arthurian legend to comment on contemporary issues. These two tales reveal Chaucer's participation in an intricate dialogue about authorship and gender. Specifically, Chaucer criticizes his fellow romance writers in the former tale and offers his lone Arthurian tale from the mouth of one of the female pilgrims in the latter. The Wife of Bath rejects the traditional glorification of Gawain in order to recast him as a nameless rapist, stripped of his famous name as punishment for his transgression of female sovereignty. She thus raises the issue of female authorship, thereby complicating Chaucer the pilgrim's professed role of *compiler* in the *General Prologue*.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY AND ARTHURIAN POLITICS

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw an explosion of Arthurian activity in both France and England. The Arthurian romance narrative flourished under the pens of such writers as Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Thomas d'Angleterre, and Béroul, and the popularity of Arthur and his knights of the Round Table continued into the thirteenth century with the emergence of the great prose cycles: the Vulgate Cycle expanded upon Chrétien's story of Lancelot and his love for Guinevere, and the Prose *Tristan* brought the legend of Tristan and Iseult firmly into the Arthurian circle. The Arthurian chronicle tradition in England, initiated in the twelfth century with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, followed by Wace's *Roman de Brut*, continued to argue for Arthur's inclusion in British history with Robert Mannyng's 1338 *Chronicle* and John Trevisa's 1387 translation of Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*.<sup>1</sup> Even the British monarchs participated in the Arthurian mythos during this time. In 1220, Henry III is reported to have received Tristan's sword from Peter de Roches, bishop of Winchester,<sup>2</sup> and in 1282, Edward I received King Arthur's crown at the Welsh surrender.<sup>3</sup> In 1344, Edward III made a vow to found an order of 300 knights, the creation of which was modeled on King Arthur's legendary Round Table.<sup>4</sup>

Considering the enthusiasm with which the Arthurian legend was met by earlier English monarchs, we would expect the kings of Chaucer's day to preside over

similar Round Table tournaments. After all, as J.A. Burrow suggests, Richard II seems to have preferred French literature over English.<sup>5</sup> However, Burrow draws this conclusion from Edith Rickert's description of the king's library, which included "un Romance de Roy Arthure," "un livre appelle Galaath" (a grail romance), and "un Romance de Percivall & Gawvn."<sup>6</sup> As Richard F. Green notes, of the fourteen books which Richard II inherited from his grandfather Edward III, "eleven of them had been pawned or sold within a year of their passing into his possession."<sup>7</sup> Green rejects Rickert's claim that Richard II was a lover of French romance, arguing instead that the king most likely "regarded this collection of Arthurian romances and *chansons de geste* as very old-fashioned and hardly worth keeping."<sup>8</sup> The majority of medieval scholars, including Roger Sherman Loomis, argue that the popularity of the Arthurian legend in England was therefore on the wane in the latter half of the fourteenth century;<sup>9</sup> as a result, the major writers of the period, such as John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, refrained from penning anything beyond the occasional reference to King Arthur and his court. Whereas the Arthurian legend abounded in the twelfth and thirteenth century, in late fourteenth-century England, we find a dearth of Arthurian romances.

Yet what does this paucity of Arthurian material from the corpus of Chaucer's writings reveal about his attitude toward the legend? Christopher Dean offers one interpretation: "Chaucer and Gower in neglecting Arthur may not be following their own inclinations but may be doing no more than accommodating the tastes of the contemporary audiences that they hoped to please."<sup>10</sup> Other scholars disagree; for

example, H.R. Patch argues that Chaucer's failure to adapt the stories of Arthuriana reveal both a lack of interest and of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> F.P. Magoun, Jr., agrees: "That he cared little for the matter of Britain seems clear from the insignificant use he made of it [...] I see no reason to believe that he was widely read in it."<sup>12</sup> Derek Brewer carries Magoun's criticism one step further, arguing that Chaucer's attitude toward the Arthurian legend is in fact negative: "Not the Narrator nor narrators but Chaucer the poet derides Arthurian romance—it is one of the constant and notable though minor traits."<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars focus on determining the exact source of Chaucer's brief Arthurian allusions. For example, B.J. Whiting, in his "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," sees the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a major influence,<sup>14</sup> whereas F.P. Magoun, Jr., offers the *Roman de la Rose* as another likely source for his Arthurian references.<sup>15</sup> Joerg O. Fichte turns away from these well-known sources, arguing for the fourteenth-century Middle English romances *Libeaus Desconus* and *Sir Perceval of Galles* as providing inspiration for Chaucer.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, for each brief reference that Chaucer makes to a character of the Arthurian narrative, several sources may be posited. When the Nun's Priest mentions "the book of Launcelot de Lake" in his tale of Chauntecleer, for example, does he have in mind the Vulgate *Lancelot*, Dante's *Inferno*, Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*, or some other Lancelot narrative?

My approach to Chaucer, like that of Stephanie Trigg in *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* and Seth Lerer in *Chaucer and His Readers*, has been through the lens of reception theory. Yet whereas both Trigg and Lerer's scholarship focuses on the reception of Chaucer by subsequent authors, my dissertation explores the ways in which the Arthurian legend is received by Chaucer—that is, how Chaucer's Arthurian allusions reflect Chaucer the reader as he interacts with and consequently reshapes his Italian, French, and Middle English sources. While I agree with Dean that Chaucer, like Gower, is acutely aware of his courtly audience, I disagree with the idea that Chaucer was not interested in or exposed to the Arthurian legend. Instead, I argue that the Matter of Britain—particularly the characters of Lancelot and Gawain—appealed greatly to Chaucer; we see the impact of this interest in texts such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his interlacing of Arthurian allusions in *The Canterbury Tales* suggests that Chaucer's view of the legend is increasingly complex as he gains confidence in and mastery of English as a poetic language. Chaucer's use of the Arthurian legend, therefore, reflects the growing contribution of the bourgeois class in fourteenth-century England to medieval literature and social commentary. While I do not argue that Chaucer speaks for all of the middle class, nonetheless, his style and thematic content echoes the interests and concerns found in other bourgeois writers, for as William Calin notes, “We see in Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Machaut, and Froissart the same witty, sophisticated, and problematic stance vis-à-vis court society” that we see in Chaucer.<sup>17</sup>



Although I am interested in exploring Chaucer's possible sources, due to the brevity of Chaucer's allusions and the absence of a listing of his personal library, I recognize the difficulty of attempting to reconstruct his reading experience. But at the same time, I suggest that all too often we ignore the context into which these allusions are placed, as well as the ways in which Chaucer's allusions mirror or differ from those who influenced him. Thus I follow in the footsteps of scholars such as Charles Muscatine and Calin in accepting Chaucer's exposure to and appreciation for the French Arthurian material. Little Arthurian material was composed in England during the late fourteenth century (with the notable exceptions of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*); however, as studies of extant wills and book lists reveal, copies of the Vulgate cycle and the Prose *Tristan* abounded within both the aristocratic and bourgeois circles.<sup>18</sup> Considering Chaucer's exposure to the court of Edward III as well as his description of himself as a voracious reader, it is difficult to imagine that he somehow eluded exposure to the Arthurian legend in an environment steeped in the literary heritage of France. Muscatine, for example, describes Chaucer as "a common descendent of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, of the great French romancers—Chrétien de Troyes, Gautier d'Arras, the anonymous author of *Flamenca*,—and of the *Renart* poets and their brothers of the naturalistic tradition."<sup>19</sup> As he notes in *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, it is from authors such as these that Chaucer's blending of styles and sense of humor develops.

Yet as Calin notes, Chaucer is not a mere translator of these French authors; he reacts to their texts, just as they in turn have reacted to earlier texts. For example, Marie de France in *Lanval* “twists traditional motifs to scrutinize contemporary literary doctrine. She also uses the traditional motifs, shaping them for her own purposes, to create her own unique vision of the world and her own unique work of art.”<sup>20</sup> Calin argues, and I agree, that Chaucer continues this trend, and offers as an example Chaucer’s transformation of la Vieille of *Le Roman de la Rose* into the pilgrim Wife of Bath: “whereas la Vieille is of uncertain social class and by profession a prostitute or kept mistress become, in old age, a combination duenna and go-between, Dame Alice is a respectable bourgeoisie and a married woman.”<sup>21</sup> In his adaptation of his French and Italian models, therefore, Chaucer performs what Douglas Kelly terms a “poetics of conspiracy;” that is, he “engages in intertextual allusions that rewrite and even correct earlier voices rather than relying on inspiration whose only source is the creative imagination,”<sup>22</sup> and it is in such a manner that I argue Chaucer rewrites the Arthurian narrative, building on the outlines provided by Chrétien and the anonymous French cycles while reshaping the story to reflect his growing interest in questions of authorship, particularly as it relates to class and gender. As the title of my dissertation suggests, I argue that Chaucer seizes hold of the Arthurian legend and makes it uniquely his. Ultimately, Chaucer’s use of the Arthurian legend reveals it to be deeply embedded in the consciousness of England, permeating all levels of society, rather than restricted to the boundaries of chronicle and romance, or the confines of the aristocracy. Furthermore, Chaucer’s use of the

Arthurian narrative challenges the status quo of fourteenth-century England, allowing the pilgrims of the lower estates to emerge as a valid judge of literature while critiquing the clergy and the aristocracy in his writing.

My dissertation, therefore, is divided into two major sections. In the first section, entitled “Arthurian (Dis)Appearances,” I examine how Chaucer’s use of the Arthurian legend in his early poems (namely the dream visions and *Troilus and Criseyde*) reveals the complexity of his attitude towards the Arthurian narrative. The title functions on multiple levels; I examine not only the *appearance* of Arthurian allusions in the dream visions, but also the *disappearance*—of Tristan in the *Book of the Duchess*, for example, or of Lancelot from all of the dream visions. At the same time, the prefix “dis-” speaks to the negativity which Chaucer assigns to sections of the Arthurian legend. The first chapter, “Tristan, Iseult, and Chaucer’s Dream Visions,” focuses on Chaucer’s dislike of the legend of Tristan and Iseult. By comparing Chaucer’s Arthurian allusions to those of his predecessors (primarily Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Eustache Deschamps), I argue that Chaucer rejects the traditional portrayal of Tristan as the ideal courtly lover, positioning him and Iseult in contexts which emphasize the destructive nature of their love, both on themselves and on society as a whole. At the same time, however, Chaucer omits Guinevere and Lancelot from his litany of lovers who destroyed kingdoms in his *Parliament of Fowls*.

Thus my second chapter, “Lancelot and *Troilus and Criseyde*,” establishes Chaucer as a discriminating reader in that he indicates that not all Arthurian material

is negative. I begin by analyzing the sources from which Chaucer constructs his story. Chaucer introduces several textual changes from Boccaccio, and taken as a whole, they evoke two major Arthurian stories—the Vulgate Cycle, also known as the *Prose Lancelot*, and Chrétien’s *Chevalier de la Charrette*. In Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde*, however, the character of Troilus diverges from that of Lancelot during the argument between Love and Reason. I examine the consequences of contrasting Troilus with Lancelot, focusing on how each character reads the situation in which their loved one is threatened, and the result caused by each reading.

The second half of my dissertation, entitled “Arthurian Creations in *The Canterbury Tales*,” focuses on the ways in which Chaucer sees others around him reading, reporting, and reacting to the Arthurian legend. Although characters such as the Wife of Bath or the Nun’s Priest are fictional constructs, Chaucer presents them as real people relating real stories. As A.J. Minnis notes, “Chaucer treats his fictional characters with the respect that the Latin compilers had reserved for their *auctores*.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Chapter 3, “‘Sire Nonnes Preest’—Reading Lancelot in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*,” begins by examining the intertextuality of the *Monk’s Tale*, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and the description of the Prioress in the *General Prologue*. I argue that Chaucer reveals various misreadings of the Arthurian legend among the religious estates while showing how the Matter of Britain can be used as a guide for moral behavior. That is, the Monk unconsciously incorporates elements of the Lancelot legend into his tales of tragedy, the Nun’s Priest focuses on the untruth of the story while using the “Book of Launcelot” as a barb against the Prioress and the Monk in

his animal fable, and the Prioress uses the love story between Lancelot and Guinevere as a model for her life. As a consequence of their incomplete readings, each discards the “wheat” of the story with the “chaff.”

Chapter 4, “Lancelot Reborn—The Squire’s Warning” turns to Chaucer’s depiction of the aristocracy and their relationship to the Arthurian legend, via the pilgrim Squire, who focuses on the absence of Arthurian knights. As the pilgrim Squire states in his tale of Canacee, Lancelot is dead. Or is he? I argue that the Squire mentions Gawain and Lancelot in an attempt to define himself in a context which threatens to misidentify him. Having heard numerous pejorative views of squires, the pilgrim Squire attempts to negotiate his position in relation to the other pilgrims, thereby referring to Lancelot in an attempt to establish his superiority over the Merchant while threatening him. Furthermore, through his references to Gawain and Lancelot, the pilgrim Squire situates himself as the living embodiment of the Arthurian legend, an aristocratic position which he views as superior to the lower estate of the Merchant. The second half of this chapter explores both the pilgrim Squire’s choice of genre and his reception by the other members of the pilgrimage, particularly the Franklin.

Through the invocation of the popular figure of Gawain in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Chaucer also displays the flexibility of the Arthurian legend to comment on contemporary issues, as well as its relevance to the fourteenth century. These two tales in particular reveal Chaucer’s participation in an intricate dialogue about authorship and gender, for both rework the Arthurian legend

in surprising ways. Chapter 5, “Chaucer’s Arthurian Critique—Sir Thopas as Anti-Gawain,” explores the ways in which Chaucer invites his audience to compare Sir Thopas with Gawain, much to the detriment of the former. Yet Chaucer does not merely seek to mock his Flemish knight. I next discuss the relationship between French Arthurian romance and the Middle English Arthurian romances, via *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, to illustrate Chaucer’s attitude towards the latter. Specifically, Chaucer criticizes the way in which his fellow Middle English romance writers treat the character of Gawain.

I finally discuss Chaucer’s lone Arthurian tale in Chapter 6, “Rapist or *Raptus*? Gawain and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*.” By examining the characteristics which Chaucer assigns to the nameless knight and comparing them to Chrétien’s *Conte de Graal*, I identify the rapist as Gawain. I argue next that the Wife of Bath rejects the traditional glorification of Gawain in order to recast him as the nameless rapist, stripped of his famous name as punishment for his transgression of female sovereignty. Such a rejection of received authority or tradition is not new with Chaucer, however, for as Muscatine notes, Jean de Meun’s realistic view in *Le Roman de la Rose* (a style which Chaucer often imitates) “is self-consciously and unambiguously critical of courtly idealism. It exposes in a merciless way the various possible readings of love that courtly sentiment ignores.”<sup>24</sup> Thus the Wife of Bath, through her treatment of Gawain, raises the issue of female authorship and its authority, complicating Chaucer the pilgrim’s professed role of *compiler* (as

opposed to *auctor*) in the *General Prologue*, and challenging the hierarchy of gender which has been imposed upon her.

Through my examination of the Arthurian sources available to Chaucer during the late fourteenth century, as well as a close reading of the contexts into which he inserts his Arthurian characters, therefore, I argue that despite the dearth of Arthurian material during this time in England, the Arthurian legend is far from passé in the mind of Geoffrey Chaucer. While his early dream visions reflect the courtly disinterest in the Arthurian legend, his later work explores the variety of attitudes—some valid, some superficial—held among the major estates of fourteenth century England, while offering challenges to the status quo of the hegemony.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapters 1 and 3 of Richard J. Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Late Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) for detailed analyses about each chronicler's presentation of Arthurian history.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Dean, *Arthur of England: English attitudes to King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 54.

<sup>3</sup> Dean 55. Edward I was also fond of holding "Round Tables," spectacles involving costumed jousting, feasting, and dancing. See Roger Sherman Loomis, "Arthurian Influence on Sport and Spectacle" (*Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959]: 553-559); Roger Sherman Loomis, "Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast" (*Speculum* 28.1 [January 1953]: 114-27); and especially Roger Sherman Loomis, "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance" (*Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter*, ed. Wilhelm R. W. Koehler, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939] 79-97) for detailed descriptions of these tournaments.

<sup>4</sup> Loomis, "Arthurian Influence on Sport and Spectacle," 554.

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain Poet* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1971) 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Edith Rickert's "King Richard II's Books" (*The Library* 4.13 [1932-33]: 144-47) for a listing of the known contents of Richard II's library. See also Edward Donald Kennedy, "Gower, Chaucer, and French Prose Arthurian Romance," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993, for 1990): 63.

<sup>7</sup> Richard F. Green, "King Richard II's Books Revisited," *Library: A Quarterly Journal of Bibliography* 31 (1976): 238.

<sup>8</sup> Green 239.

<sup>9</sup> Loomis, "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance."

<sup>10</sup> Qtd. in Dean 129.

<sup>11</sup> H.R. Patch, "Chaucer and Medieval Romance," *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell by his Assistants* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1926) 95-108.

<sup>12</sup> F.P. Magoun, Jr., "Chaucer's Sir Gawain and the Old French *Roman de la Rose*," *Modern Language Notes* 67.3 (March 1952): 183-85.

<sup>13</sup> Derek Brewer, "Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance," *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974) 258.

<sup>14</sup> *Mediaeval Studies* 9 (1947): 189-234.

<sup>15</sup> Magoun 183-85.

<sup>16</sup> Joerg O. Fichte, "Images of Arthurian Literature Reflected in Chaucer's Poetry," *Archiv* 230 (1993): 52-61.

<sup>17</sup> William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 271.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M.M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Edith Rickert, "King Richard II's Books";



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Margaret Deanesly, "Vernacular Books in England in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Modern Language Review* 15 (1920): 350.n.5); Alison Stones, "Secular manuscript illumination in France," *Medieval Manuscripts and Textual Criticism*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1976): 83-102; Felicity Riddy, "Middle English romance: family, marriage, intimacy," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 235-52; and Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003). Keith Busby discusses the extant manuscripts of Chrétien in "The Manuscripts of Chrétien's Romances," in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005) 64-75. I provide specific details in the appropriate chapters as to the distribution of Arthurian material.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 5.

<sup>20</sup> Calin 23.

<sup>21</sup> Calin 329.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Kelly, *The Conspiracy of Allusion: Description, Rewriting, and Authorship from Macrobius to Medieval Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) xii.

<sup>23</sup> A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) 203.

<sup>24</sup> Muscatine 74. Muscatine defines the concept of the "realistic view" of Jean de Meun as a "preoccupation with the animal facts of life" rather than the "reportorial detail of the modern fiction describable by these labels" (59).

## PART I: ARTHURIAN (DIS)APPEARANCES

### CHAPTER 1: TRISTAN, ISEULT, AND CHAUCER'S DREAM VISIONS

In the dream visions of Geoffrey Chaucer, which include *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer clearly follows in the footsteps of such writers as Deschamps, Froissart, and Machaut, by alluding to specific Arthurian characters, as Edward Donald Kennedy has noted.<sup>1</sup> These references are brief, as in the French *dits*, and not central to the action of the dream visions in which they occur. More importantly, though, the French writers offer Arthurian characters as positive models of courtly behavior; Lancelot, Tristan, and Gawain are virtuous and loyal, and women such as Guinevere and Iseult are paragons of beauty. When Chaucer takes up the pen to create his own dream visions, then, we expect similar references; instead, we find far fewer Arthurian references in his early poetry. For example, in Fragment A of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, which most scholars accept as having been written by Chaucer, we are told that the character of Largesse “Hild by the hond a knight of prys, / Was sib to Artour of Britaigne” (1198-99). Not surprisingly, considering that Chaucer is merely translating from the French, this same character appears in Guillaume de Lorris’s thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*: “Tenait Largesse au coeur vaillant / Un beau chevalier descendant / Du bon roi Artus de Bretaigne” (1207-09). Aside from this vague reference to Arthur’s kinsman, the only aspect of the Arthurian narrative that we find in Chaucer’s dream visions is the story of Tristan and Iseult.

In this chapter, therefore, I shall examine the one reference to Tristan and the three references to Iseult through close readings of *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*.<sup>2</sup> With each poem, I will consider first Chaucer's likely sources in order to establish general attitudes towards these characters among the French poets, and second, the contexts into which he places (or displaces, as the title suggests) these medieval lovers. Although Kennedy argues that "the Arthurian references in these earlier works are neutral,"<sup>3</sup> I intend to show that Chaucer mirrors the negative English courtly attitudes towards the Arthurian legend. However, I argue that Chaucer's dislike of the Arthurian myth extends only to the stories surrounding Tristan and Iseult; although Lancelot and Guinevere are conspicuous in the French *dits*, Chaucer's dream visions contain no reference to them. Thus the absence of Lancelot and Guinevere from Chaucer's early poems marks a clear divergence from his French sources, and the contrasts which emerge between Lancelot and Tristan provide a basis for determining Chaucer's dislike of the latter character. Specifically, whereas Lancelot symbolizes absolute loyalty, Tristan represents an unnatural love, one which ultimately proves destructive, both to the individual soul and to society as a whole.

## I. The Background of the Tristan Narrative

Before I examine Chaucer's dream visions, let me briefly establish the basic scope of the Tristan and Iseult narrative, and its intersections with the Arthurian

legend. Although the Tristan narrative can be traced back to Celtic mythology and the Welsh triads, my focus begins in the twelfth century with French romance writers. By this point in time, the story has unfolded as such: Tristan, a knight known for his skills at chess, harping, and hunting, is nephew to King Mark of Cornwall. His uncle sends him to Ireland to acquire the king's daughter as wife for Mark; however, upon the return journey, Tristan and Iseult accidentally imbibe a love potion intended for Iseult and Mark. While the potency of the potion is limited to three years in Béroul and his followers, not all other medieval variations follow suit.<sup>4</sup> Through often extensive trickery, Tristan and Iseult repeatedly convince Mark of their "innocence" and fight against the jealous barons who seek to expose their treason against the king. Finally, Tristan is exiled and marries (but never consummates his marriage with) Iseult of Brittany. Unfortunately, many of the existing Tristan narratives are fragmentary, but from what remains, we can gather that after sustaining a massive wound in combat, Tristan dies when he mistakenly believes that Iseult of Ireland has forsaken him. Soon after her arrival at Tristan's deathbed, Iseult dies of grief, and the lovers are buried together.

The two major texts of the twelfth century include Beroul's *Tristan* and Thomas of England's *Tristan*,<sup>5</sup> although numerous fragments documenting isolated events have survived. In these early editions, Arthur is a marginal figure, appearing sporadically to supervise one of Iseult's ordeals (in order to prove her faithfulness to Mark, Iseult swears on relics). A few other authors devote time to Tristan, such as

Marie de France, whose lai *Chèvrefeuille* illustrates the ingenuity undertaken by the two lovers to see each other secretly.

Most importantly, Chrétien de Troyes links Tristan firmly with the Arthurian legend when he makes brief reference to the lovers in his first two romances, *Erec et Enide* and *Cliges*, the latter of which offers an interesting commentary on the reception of Tristan and Iseult.<sup>6</sup> In this story, Cliges falls in love with Fenice, the virginal wife of his uncle. When their mutual ardor is made plain to one another, Cliges suggests flight; however, Fenice quickly rejects this plan, declining to be compared to Tristan and Iseult, whose love was censured because of their treason. And of course, we cannot forget the influence that the Tristan narrative has had on the Arthurian legend. Lori J. Walters suggests that Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* was a response to the Tristan narratives, and we find several echoes between Tristan and Lancelot; for example, Chrétien repeats the motif of the bloody sheets, and the ensuing discovery scene, in his *Charrette*, and the larger structure of the love triangle of Lancelot-Guinevere-Arthur parallels that of Tristan-Iseult-Mark.<sup>7</sup>

It is not until the middle of the thirteenth century that Tristan becomes a clear part of the Arthurian thread, when, as Norris J. Lacy notes, "one of the major innovations of the *Prose Tristan* is the thorough fusion of the Arthurian world and the Tristan tradition."<sup>8</sup> It is in this mid-thirteenth-century text that Tristan joins the fellowship of the Round Table and shares adventures with Lancelot, Gawain, and other notable Arthurian knights, including the quest for the grail. In addition, a clearly defined parallel between Tristan and Iseult and Lancelot and Guinevere

emerges, as fellow knights debate the prowess of these two knights, and describe one queen's beauty through comparison with the other. Although a few editions of the *Prose Tristan* retain the ending of the twelfth-century texts, the majority depict Tristan dying from a wound inflicted by Mark.

But what, if any, exposure to these texts did Chaucer have? Unfortunately, that question is difficult, if not impossible, to answer. As Kennedy notes, "Chaucer's allusions to Tristram and Isolde are also so general that it is difficult to say whether or not he knew any version of the *Tristan*," although he does conclude that the prose *Tristan* was "the one best known in the Middle Ages and Renaissance."<sup>9</sup> It is not my intention, therefore, to find conclusive evidence that Chaucer used one text over another; however, as I hope to prove in the following discussion, Chaucer was well aware of the Tristan and Iseult legend, both from the infrequent allusions found in the poetry of Machaut, Deschamps, and Froissart, and the larger outline of the narrative as found in Bérout and Thomas.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the references to Arthurian characters among the French love poets are neither frequent nor lengthy;<sup>11</sup> however, the fact remains that they are present in the narratives which Chaucer later mined for his own texts. In addition, the two characters most frequently mentioned are Lancelot and Tristan—for example, Lancelot is named ten times in Machaut's *dits*, while Tristan garners a respectable seven appearances (each time in the company of Lancelot). Deschamps mentions these two knights in close proximity once, while Dante separates them by sixty-one lines in Canto V of *The Inferno*. Each of these authors helped to create the fount of

material from which Chaucer would draw throughout his literary career. That he did not draw more frequently from these sources is due to the lack of courtly interest in the Arthurian narrative as a whole among the English, as discussed in the introduction, and Chaucer's personal dislike of the Tristan legend.

## II. Patronage and *The Book of the Duchess*

Chaucer's major source for this dream vision was Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behainge*, which does not contain any references to the Arthurian legend. Neither does another, more minor source, also by Machaut: *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*. It is from these two texts that scholars argue that Chaucer received the bulk of his material for *The Book of the Duchess*,<sup>12</sup> and so initially we may be tempted to claim that due to lack of references in his sources, either Chaucer was not familiar with the Arthurian legend, particularly the Tristan and Iseult interlude, or that Chaucer slavishly adhered to his sources. However, two other sources from which Chaucer borrowed were Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre* and *Le Dit dou Lyon*, in which we find Arthurian references. For example, in Machaut's *Navarre*, the narrator offers Lancelot and Tristan as evidence of men's suffering:

Good Lancelot and Tristan  
Experienced ten times more pain  
Than any woman could suffer,

As much as she could subject herself to it,  
 And they were a hundred times more loyal  
 Than Jason was disloyal . . . (2841-46)<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, the *Lyon* lists Lancelot and Tristan among (and consequently equal to) such idealized characters as Hector, Troilus, and Charlemagne. A more contemporary source, *Le Paradis d'Amours*, by Jean Froissart, follows in the footsteps of Machaut as Dame Pleasure lists Lancelot, Tristan, and Iseult among the servants of the God of Love. When we consider the suffering of the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess*, then, a comparison to either Lancelot or Tristan seems appropriate in order to establish the depth of his suffering due to his experience of love. However, as I argue in this section, this absence is due to a deliberate choice on Chaucer's part, rather than lack of knowledge, resulting from the poem's probable political connection to John of Gaunt and Gaunt's recently deceased duchess.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Chaucer's lack of Arthurian allusions suggests a desire to avoid associating his patron with a treasonous character such as Tristan.

When the narrator enters his dream, he finds himself in a richly decorated room. Within the glasswork of the windows, the narrator sees the fall of Troy, and upon the walls "bothe text and glose / Of al the Romaunce of the Rose" (333-34).<sup>15</sup> As mentioned above, Machaut, Deschamps, Dante, and Froissart frequently placed Arthurian characters alongside heroes and heroines of antiquity. In fact, of the nine figures mentioned in Chaucer's description, only three do not appear alongside Lancelot and Tristan in the French and Italian sources—Priam, Lamedon, and



Lavigne. Of course, we are told explicitly here by Chaucer that the windows depict “hooly al the story of Troye” (326); thus it is no surprise to find Arthurian lovers, who belong to another time and place, absent. What does this reveal about Chaucer’s knowledge? Simply this—that Chaucer knows his material. In other words, he does not misrepresent Arthurian characters by interjecting them when he finds them in the company of classical heroes in his sources. He is not merely parroting his sources, but rather deliberately selecting details for a desired effect.

Yet Chaucer offers another litany of lovers four hundred lines later. The black knight has just expressed his wish to die soon due to the loss of his *fers*, and so the narrator attempts to comfort the grieving knight by recounting lovers damned because they killed themselves (or others) on account of their beloved. Neither Lancelot nor Tristan makes an appearance in this list, as neither died for love—Lancelot succumbs from old age, and Tristan from a wound sustained in battle. However, Iseult seems a prime candidate for inclusion for two reasons. First, she, like the Black Knight, feels that she has nothing for which to live once her beloved is gone; in the *Prose Tristan*, she threatens suicide should Tristan die after receiving a fatal blow from King Mark: “‘Let him die whenever he wishes, for certainly I shall go with him that very day! I’ll kill myself, so help me God, and thereby end my suffering!’” (77.52-54).<sup>16</sup> In this version, Tristan clasps Iseult so tightly in his final moment that her heart stops beating at the same instance in which he dies, and the danger of suicide is averted. However, in other medieval versions, Tristan dies under the belief that Iseult has abandoned him; when she arrives too late at his bedside to comfort him, she joins him

in death. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, she is among the damned; although she is not explicitly mentioned in the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Tristan is—and it is likely that a medieval audience could reasonably expect Iseult to accompany her lover in the afterlife as she does in death. And as I shall argue later in this chapter, Chaucer does not think highly of Iseult.

Two of the characters, Hector and Achilles, painted on the wall reappear seven hundred lines later when the narrator engages the mourning black knight in conversation about his lost *fers*. When challenged by the naïve narrator as to the beauty of his beloved, the black knight offers a litany of classical heroes and their defining traits. Once again, the names of no Arthurian knights fall from the narrator's lips. However, it is not because an Arthurian reference would not be appropriate; after all, in Machaut's *Confort d'ami*, Gawain, Tristan, and Lancelot are offered as paragons of courage and resolve; one or more of these characters therefore could easily have replaced or supplemented the mention of Alexander the Great or Hector.<sup>17</sup> Might there be other reasons as to why, when Chaucer's sources do not hesitate to blend Arthurian with classical, he himself does not?

Let us consider the motivation for writing *The Book of the Duchess*. When the Black Knight expresses his desire for death ("what to doone? / Be oure Lord, hyt ys to deye soone" [689-90]), due to his immense suffering, we might be reminded of Froissart's *L'Espinette Amoureuse*, in which the lover composes a ballad to express his agony at the hands of love: "I will end up just as did Tristan, / For I will die from loving passionately."<sup>18</sup> Froissart's narrator has just learned of his lady's impending

death (whereas the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess* has already experienced the death of his beloved), and compares himself to Tristan, that paragon of suffering. A similar sentiment is expressed in Froissart's *Paradis d'Amour*, when the narrator composes a lay for the god of love:

Neither Achilles nor Narcissus  
Nor Eucharion,  
Tristan, Paris, Loh nor Jason  
Had much more suffering, compared to me. (1151-54)<sup>19</sup>

As Christopher Dean notes, “of all the Arthurian lovers, Tristan and Iseult most ambiguously illustrated depth and passion in love and also the great suffering that it could cause;”<sup>20</sup> Catherine Batt and Rosalind Field note that “[lyrics] from the troubadours to Chaucer use Tristan as the epitome of the suffering lover.”<sup>21</sup> Why, then, does Chaucer not compare the Black Knight to Tristan? After all, the Black Knight has already compared the extent of his sorrow to that of Sisyphus: “This ys my peyne wythoute red, / Alway deyng and be not ded, / That Cesiphus, that lyeth in helle, / May not of more sorwe telle” (587-90).

Like Sisyphus, Tristan is a denizen of hell; however, I have yet to discuss other traits of this particular Arthurian lover. Chaucer has already incorporated the motif of chess into the poem, and Tristan is a celebrated chess player. It is through this game that Tristan is abducted, and ultimately brought to Iseult, whereas the Black Knight's game with Lady Fortune leads to the loss of his *fers*. Furthermore, the narrator encounters the Black Knight during a hunt; another of Tristan's defining

characteristics is his skill at venery.<sup>22</sup> If a medieval audience has Tristan in mind due to the presence of chess and hunting, a negative contrast between the two characters might result. In other words, hunting and bereavement are incompatible. Twice in the *Prose Tristan*, Tristan's love of the hunt disrupts his relationship with Iseult. The first instance occurs before the lovers have been discovered, and parallels the opening scene of Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*. The visiting knight Palamedes, who has fallen in love with Iseult, tricks Mark into allowing him to escort the queen away from the castle. Unfortunately, Tristan is absent from the court on this particular morning due to hunting, and his recovery of Iseult is delayed. Later in the narrative, after the lovers have been forced to flee to the Forest of Morroiz, Tristan once again loses Iseult when Mark seizes Iseult (who, ironically enough, is engaged in a game of chess with a young girl when Mark arrives). Tristan is out hunting with his servant Gorvenal and does not learn of her abduction until Mark has secured her in a tower.

Whereas Chaucer's Black Knight is, according to Rooney, "excluded from the lively scene around him and expresses his lack of interest in the hunt and the court life it stands for,"<sup>23</sup> in the Arthurian narrative, Tristan fails in his duties as a lover due to his devotion to the hunt. A sharp polarity emerges; either one participates in the social realm of the hunt or game, or one is a lover mourning the loss of the beloved; therefore a comparison to Tristan might result in unfavorable implications. First, drawing a parallel between the suffering of Tristan and that of the Black Knight may imply that though great, it is not unique. Rather than risk an adverse interpretation, Chaucer allows the Black Knight to compare himself to Sisyphus, whose suffering is

not due to love but rather trickery. The Black Knight also compares his suffering to that of Cassandra when Troy fell (1246); not only does this bring us full circle to the Fall of Troy, but again, Cassandra's grief is due to lack of perception. Whereas the Black Knight has played recklessly with Lady Fortune, Cassandra's people fail to heed her ominous warnings.

Secondly, it may suggest fault on the part of Chaucer's esteemed patron. That is, just as Tristan neglected his duty of preserving the queen from injury, the Black Knight (and therefore John of Gaunt) is partially responsible for the loss of the *fers*. A hint of this blame already exists in Chaucer's dream vision. As the Black Knight informs the narrator,

‘At the ches with me [Fortune] gan to pleye;

.....

She stall on me and tok my fers.

And when I sawgh my fers awaye,

Allas, I kouthe no lenger playe. . .’ (652-56)

He continues his lament, ruing his failure to be fully alert and his dismissal of the known dangers. At this point, the naïve narrator does not understand the death metaphor, and if the Black Knight had been identified with Tristan through allusion, some members of the audience might question why the Black Knight does not follow Tristan's example and attempt to correct his failure. By not evoking Tristan, Chaucer is able to emphasize the chance nature of Blanche's death; a medieval

audience understands just as well as a modern one the very human experience of blaming oneself for another's death

More importantly, Chaucer is writing primarily for a specific audience—John of Gaunt, a prominent member of the same court which viewed the Arthurian legend as passé. What would be the implications if Chaucer were to compare Gaunt and his duchess to Tristan and Iseult? According to William Calin, these two Arthurian lovers “commit terrible deeds from a normal medieval perspective.”<sup>24</sup> Chief among these are adultery, treason, and incest, just to name a few. Although Calin is speaking specifically of Beroul's version, his comments are applicable to the Tristan narrative as a whole. Tristan's suffering is great indeed; however, through his failure to retain the queen, she is restored to her rightful husband. Would John of Gaunt care to be linked with a man who betrayed his king and violated the sanctity of marriage? It is one thing to have the narrator (ostensibly the poet, as in Machaut) compare himself to Tristan, but it is not in Chaucer's interest to impose that comparison upon another, particularly one close to the king. Even Chrétien de Troyes, an ardent supporter of the Arthurian legend, avoids the problematic legend in favor of married love.

### III. Unnatural Love in *The House of Fame*

In Chaucer's next major dream poem, *The House of Fame*, we find one brief reference to “bele Isawde” when Lady Fame invokes Iseult's name (1796). The narrator stands in the House of Fame, watching as Lady Fame doles out renown,

disdain, or silence to her many supplicants. After the seventh company approaches, seeking glory despite their lack of deeds, Lady Fame rebukes them:

“These ben they that wolde honour  
 Have, and do noskynnes labour,  
 Ne doo no good, and yet han lawde;  
 And that men wende that bele Isawde  
 Ne coude hem noght of love werne,  
 And yet she that grynt at a querne  
 Ys al to good to ese her herte.” (1793-98)

Naturally, the word “Isawde” completes the rhyme scheme of the couplet, corresponding to “lawde” in the previous line—and we might easily end our commentary on Chaucer’s Arthurian references there. After all, inserting the name of another beautiful heroine, such as Polyxena or Cleopatra, would mar the rhythm of the line. However, of the nine times in the poem when Lady Fame receives appeals, it is only in the seventh reply that she invokes a person; her other responses are brief and limited essentially to instructions to Eolus. For example, she tells the fifth group, who seek silence for their deeds, “Nay, ye shul liven everychon! / Blow thy trumpes, and that anon” (1717-18). Clearly there is a purpose to Lady Fame’s invocation of the “bele Isawde” beyond simply fulfilling the rhyme scheme.

This brief reference to Iseult raises two major questions. Why does Chaucer select Iseult from the dozens of classical and Arthurian heroines with which he is familiar, and why does he place this reference in the mouth of Lady Fame (as

opposed to appearing on a wall, or mentioned by the narrator himself, as is so common among the French love poets)? Let us first consider the context. A group of petitioners have approached Lady Fame, seeking glory without deeds—specifically, “That wommen loven us for wod” (1747).<sup>25</sup> This situation is in sharp contrast with a scene from Froissart’s *L’Espinette Amoureuse*. In Ballade XLVIII of the lover’s complaint, the narrator remarks:

Lancelot, Tristan, Lionel,  
 Porus, Cassiel the Baudrain,  
 Paris and many a young man  
 Has not been loved  
 Just for saying: “It would please me,  
 Lady, if you would now take this chaplet  
 And give me, without repeal,  
 Your love.”  
 Not at all, but rather they have given up  
 Their health in great martyrdom. (2308-17)<sup>26</sup>

According to the courtly love tradition, the lover must risk all in pursuit of his beloved’s favor. Guillaume Machaut echoes this idea in his *Livre dou Voir Dit* when his narrator recounts the deeds of Piramus, Leander, and Lancelot, performed in the service of love.<sup>27</sup> Thus Arthurian characters, specifically Tristan, are associated with this custom, and Chaucer would have been exposed to these French writings, as is evidenced by his own works, such as *The Knight’s Tale*, in which the male characters



must perform great deeds in order to be awarded the hand of women such as Emelye. Therefore, by invoking Iseult in *The House of Fame*, when Lady Fame rejects the suit of the seventh group of petitioners, railing against them for their idleness, she reminds them of the traditional expectations for lovers.

Yet why Iseult? Why not Guinevere, Hero, or Thisbe? Could Chaucer not have reworked the line and maintained the integrity of the rhyme scheme? Let us examine more closely Lady Fame's rebuke: "men wende that bele Isawde / Ne coude hem noght of love werne" (1796-97). By alluding to Iseult (as opposed to any other female heroine of the courtly love tradition), Lady Fame reveals how impractical these petitioners are in their expectations because as Chaucer's French contemporaries suggest, Tristan and Iseult's love for one another is rivaled only by their loyalty. The narrator of Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre* has already established Tristan as the paragon of loyalty, and the beloved in Froissart's *L'Espinette Amoureuse* assures her lover that her heart "is bound up with love, with knots as tight, / As pretty Isolde was for Tristan / And Guinevere for valiant Lancelot" (2767-69).<sup>28</sup> In other words, Iseult would never desert Tristan for another lover.

Both of the above references, however, include Guinevere and Lancelot; what sets Tristan and Iseult apart from these and other lovers, both Arthurian and classical, is the love potion. Chaucer's English contemporary, John Gower, refers to this potion in the sixth book of his *Confessio Amantis*, noting in his Latin glosses that "Tristan, on account of a drink that Brangwein offered to him aboard the ship, was intoxicated

with love for Fair Isolde.”<sup>29</sup> While the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, Hero and Leander, and Pyramus and Thisbe arises in a more natural fashion (and may fade, should they live long enough), Tristan and Iseult are forever bound to each other. As Froissart in *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece* says of Tristan that he “Was penetrated so deeply / By the fire of love that menaces many a heart / That he was brought to his end” (3363-65).<sup>30</sup> In other words, according to the tradition with which Chaucer’s sources were familiar, the potency of the love potion does not fade. Hence, when Lady Fame rebukes the seventh group of petitioners by invoking Iseult’s name, she makes a clear statement as to the worth of such idlers; ladies such as Iseult are forever beyond their reach; even women who labor, or “that grynt at a querne” (1789) are out of bounds.

By focusing on this one exchange, however, Iseult appears in a neutral, if not favorable light. We must take a step back and consider the immediate source of this reference: Lady Fame. After all, she has denied the seventh group of petitioners that which she willingly confers upon the sixth group:

‘I graunte . . .

.....

That every man wene hem at ese,

Though they goon in ful bade lese’ (1763-68).

There is no discernable difference between the sixth and seventh group. Both consist of men who do nothing yet expect to reap vast rewards. According to Edwards in *The Dream of Chaucer*, “As the figure of arbitrary designation and naming, Fame denies a

connection between merit and reward, being and reputation;”<sup>31</sup> that is, Fame represents chaos and disorder, and is antithetical to the system of courtly love which she has just espoused to the seventh group. With this in mind, let us return to the legend of Tristan and Iseult; specifically, what binds these two lovers together? Mutual passion, true—but what prompts that link? The potion, which provokes unnatural love and is not intended for Tristan in the first place.

Although all of Chaucer’s precursors speak favorably of Tristan and Iseult’s love, none comment on the paradox of the potion. However, it is difficult to imagine that someone who devours books as avidly as Chaucer claims to have done is not aware of the potion and its impact on its unfortunate lovers. Gower, in his *Confessio Amantis*, offers Tristan and Iseult as well-known examples of drunkenness in the sixth book: “In every mannes mouth it is / Hou Tristram was of love drunke / With Bele Ysolde. . .” (VI.470-72). Nor is this an idle drunkenness, but rather “drunkeschipe for to drede” (VI.479). While the French writers focused on the intense love fostered by the potion, the English could not lose sight of the danger of passion, both to the individuals involved and to the larger state.

That is to say, while many lovers succumb to love at first sight (or first mention of the beloved’s name), the enjoyment of that love is recumbent on the performance of deeds. William Calin notes that the *Roman de la Rose* illustrates this aspect of *fin’ amor*: “The love affair ultimately is a social act and is meant to contribute to the well-being of an aristocratic caste . . . . The privileged irresponsibility of childhood, the play and self-absorption represented by Oiseuse and

Deduit, have to be surpassed before the Lover can become an integrated, adult member of society.”<sup>32</sup> There are no trials which result in maturation in the legend of Tristan and Iseult; Iseult does not love Tristan because he is worthy or because of his deeds, but because she accidentally drinks a magical potion with him *en route* to her intended husband. Everything which follows the consumption of the potion is a continuation of their drunkenness; they do not seek to participate in the larger society, but rather, they elevate the private life at the expense of the public life. As Calin notes in his discussion of Beroul, Tristan and Iseult are “geniuses at manipulation and deception and lie for the sheer pleasure of it.”<sup>33</sup> Joan Tasker Grimbert agrees that the love of Tristan and Iseult is selfish, noting that theirs is a “fated / fatal love,” one which is beyond their control,<sup>34</sup> as opposed to the *amour chevaleresque* of lovers such as Lancelot and Guinevere, which “inspires prowess that benefits the entire community.”<sup>35</sup>

Such an unnatural, antisocial love would not appeal to Chaucer, and we find evidence of this in the opening of *The House of Fame*, where we find the story of Dido and Aeneas. While several lines are spent in the traditional fashion, lamenting the falseness of Aeneas, the narrator closes his account of these lovers with a favorable account of this faithless lover:

But to excusen Eneas  
 Fullyche of al his grete trespass,  
 The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle,  
 Bad hym goo into Itayle,

And leve Auffrikes regioun. (427-31)

What follows in the poem is a brief account of his travails culminating in his success due to the aid of Jupiter and Venus. Thus the final impression of Aeneas with which we are left is a favorable one; Chaucer's narrator suggests that Aeneas's faithlessness to Dido is permissible due to his fidelity to a higher duty—the gods and the city which he is to establish. Even the goddess of love does not hold him accountable for his broken vow to his beloved. The narrator's own reaction to the story is telling; his next thought is ““ Yet sawgh I never such noblesse / Of ymages, ne such richesse, / As I saugh graven in this chirche” (471-73). His focus is on the quality of the ornamentation, rather than the message of betrayal. Although the story impacts him enough to be recorded in the text of the dream vision, this duty to the state erases, in his mind, the faithlessness of Aeneas, and the narrator quickly proceeds to the next vista.

This emphasis on duty over love is in sharp contrast to the story of Tristan and Iseult, at the heart of which, as Grimbert notes, is “a mutual ardor so strong and exclusive [that it] override[s] the most compelling family, social, and religious taboos.”<sup>36</sup> When we consider Chaucer's other lovers, we find that such disruptive behavior is not acceptable; Troilus places the needs of Troy above his own when Criseyde is traded for Antenor, and Arveragus will not let his love for Dorigen stand in the way of her vow to Aurelius in *The Franklin's Tale*. In other words, love must be moderate; otherwise it is destructive and undesirable—as is evidenced by the villainous judge in *The Physician's Tale*.

Although it is a brief reference, Chaucer successfully reinforces his narrator's negative perception of Fame; in fact, less than one hundred lines later, the narrator, when asked by a fellow bystander if he too seeks fame, responds, "I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy, / For no such cause, by my hed!" (1874-75). But more importantly, Chaucer indicates not only his dislike of the Tristan aspect of the Arthurian legend, but also the cause for it. Due to the love potion, the passion between Tristan and Iseult pales in comparison beside lovers whose feelings arise naturally and who actively make the choice to pursue their ardor—lovers such as Lancelot and Palamon, whom love enters through the eyes, rather than through the mouth. Although Chaucer's French contemporaries rank Tristan and Iseult among the likes of Hero and Leander, Paris and Helen, and Lancelot and Guinevere, Chaucer actively denies them a place in the pantheon of lovers, relegating them instead to the house of ill repute. Perhaps Chaucer was familiar with the rendering of the love potion scene in the Middle English *Sir Tristrem*, where the faithful hound Houdain laps a few drops of the potion and is therefore bound to the lovers eternally—at the very least, Chaucer would nod approvingly at its parodic treatment.

#### IV. *The Parliament of Fowls* and the Denizens of Hell

At first glance, the Arthurian references in *The Parliament of Fowls* seem innocuous enough. While exploring the temple of Venus, the narrator lists a number of well-known lovers whose stories have been depicted on the temple wall: "al here

love, and in what plyt they dyde” (294). The only Arthurian names among this classical litany are Tristan and Iseult, and as discussed earlier, such a blending of classical and Arthurian is far from unusual; the fourteenth-century English *Parlement of the Thre Ages* also gives a list of lovers who have yielded to Death’s power, including Tristan, Iseult, and Guinevere, and in Froissart’s *Paradis d’Amour*, Lady Pleasure describes the extensive company of lovers who serve the god of love. However, *The Parliament of Fowls* continues the negative evaluation of Tristan and Iseult in that Chaucer alters his French and Italian sources to evoke Dante’s *Inferno*. In other words, as a result of their unnatural and destructive love, Tristan and Iseult are marked as denizens of Hell; their example is one to avoid, rather than to emulate.

Scholarly comments on this passage have been cursory at best. A.C. Spearing observes of the narrator that “[h]aving glanced at the temple’s wall-paintings with their stories of lovers from Tristan to Troilus, Chaucer returns to the fresher air of the garden,”<sup>37</sup> while Kennedy comments in passing on the familiar convention of “[c]atalogues of lovers and the association of Isolde with Helen of Troy.”<sup>38</sup> Kathleen Hewitt, in considering the entire group of lovers, sees them as a “memento mori” meant to balance the “unselfconscious fertility of the edenic beginning.”<sup>39</sup> Such a lack of scholarly attention to the actual names contained within this particular catalogue suggests that Chaucer appears to be following convention, offering a neutral reference to the lovers under examination.

However, when we consider the placement of this reference in the context of the dream vision as a whole, and Chaucer’s manipulation of his source texts, we find

that Chaucer in all actuality continues his negative critique of Tristan and Iseult from *The House of Fame*. The allusion occurs when the narrator visits the temple of Venus. After gazing on the goddess of love reclining on a bed of gold, the narrator turns to examine the walls, where we find painted the stories of men and women who have served and died for love. When we examine Chaucer's immediate source for this scene, specifically, the 62<sup>nd</sup> canto of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, we find the broken bows of Diana's followers, and learn of the stories of a variety of lovers: "It saw events painted everywhere among which, in a much finer art, it discerned all the deeds of Nino's bride. And, at the foot of the mulberry tree, it saw Pyramus and Thisbe and the already stained berries. Among these it saw great Hercules on Iole's lap and sorrowful Byblis piteously [sic] moving to implore Caunus."<sup>40</sup> Tristan and Iseult hold no place among Boccaccio's lovers, and in Chaucer's later description of the temple of Venus in *The Knight's Tale*, we are told only of Narcissus, Solomon, Hercules, Medea and Circes, Turnus, and Ceres; the knight closes his list with "Suffiseth here ensamples oon or two / And though I koude rekene a thousand mo" (1.1953-54). In the descriptions found in both Boccaccio and Chaucer, context about each lover is offered; for example, in the above passage from Boccaccio, Pyramus and Thisbe are depicted at the foot of the blood-stained mulberry tree, and in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, "enchauntementz" are linked to Medea and Circes (1.1944).

Although these are all highly recognizable characters to a medieval audience, each poet adds a flourish of detail, allowing the lovers to stand out individually. This is often a rhetorical device; for example in *The House of Fame*, the eagle describes to



Chaucer “nyce Ykarus, / That fleigh to highe that the hete / Hys wynges malt, and he fel wete / In myd the see” just as Chaucer himself soars above the fields and plains (920-23). Such exposition heightens the humor as the situation as the eagle places Chaucer in a parallel situation. Yet in *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer tersely lists his lovers, offering no comment on their situations or their major characteristics. Although there are other examples of Chaucer’s brevity, it is possible that he omits any accentuation for these characters in order to make a specific point about them. That is, Chaucer has drawn upon another source for his catalogue of lovers—specifically Canto V of Dante’s *Inferno*—and wishes to emphasize their common fate—an eternity of hell—rather than their individual associations.

When Dante offers his register of lovers, he provides details about most of his characters, just as Boccaccio does. Virgil points out Helen to Dante: “See Helen there, the root of evil woe / lasting long years” (V.64-65).<sup>41</sup> Yet as he continues his litany, the descriptions diminish until even individual names are omitted: ““see Paris, Tristan—then, more than a thousand / he pointed out to me, and named them all, / those shades whom love cut off from life on earth” (V.67-69).<sup>42</sup> What is significant here is the mention of Tristan. Although Lancelot is referenced some sixty lines later, he is present only through the mention of the panderous book read by Paolo and Francesca; there is no evidence that either Lancelot or Guinevere is a denizen of Hell. Only Tristan, and by implication, Iseult, is physically present.

As Morgan, Benson, and others have noted, Chaucer draws on the second circle of Hell, inhabited by carnal sinners in Dante’s *Inferno*, in order to supply six

additional names to Boccaccio's original list.<sup>43</sup> Only five more names are attributed to Chaucer's own "inspiration." Morgan comments that these six are "the carnal sinners who subject reason to desire" but fails to ask a crucial question: why does Chaucer invoke Dante and his second circle of Hell in this dream vision?<sup>44</sup> Bennett suggests that "Chaucer means us to think of his [Troilus's] despair and pitiful death, as well as of Dido's, Tristram's, and the rest,"<sup>45</sup> allowing a medieval audience to ponder the transience of love and earthly happiness. While I agree with Bennett's assessment, I would also argue that by juxtaposing Dante's list of damned lovers onto Boccaccio's original list, Chaucer reminds his audience of the danger surrounding such love as these characters experience; it is a warning to avoid these types of love, rather than a celebration or a model for emulation. If we read a few lines beyond Chaucer's catalogue of lovers, this idea is reinforced, for we are told that "Alle these were peynted on that other syde, / And al here love, and in what plyt they dyde" (293-94). As Cooney notes, this final line sets up an equality between love and death, "indicating the ill fate of lustful lovers, and implicitly relating the two as cause and effect."<sup>46</sup>

Although Howard H. Schless also recognizes that Chaucer's list of lovers derives partly from Dante, he argues that "these are the most famous lovers of medieval literature, and Chaucer would scarcely have needed any source other than common knowledge to 'recall' them."<sup>47</sup> Yet this reference to Dante is not the first to occur in this dream vision; Chaucer's audience has been well prepared for the circle of damned lovers. If we turn back to the story with which *Parliament* opens, we find

an important comment in the dialogue between the younger and elder Scipio.

“Affrycan” tells his grandson that “likerous folk, after that they ben dede, / Shul whirle aboute th’erthe alwey in peyne” (79-80); although he then suggests that this is not an eternal punishment, his language nonetheless evokes the imagery of the second circle of Hell. As Bennett notes, this comment “has no equivalent in the *Somnium Scipionis* of Cicero.”<sup>48</sup>

When we consider the other details from the *Inferno*, coupled with the terseness of his listing, it becomes more difficult to dismiss Chaucer’s changes to Boccaccio’s temple as coincidental—even more so upon realizing that Chaucer also alters the order of details which the narrator experiences. In Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, Arcite’s prayer enters the temple of Venus, where it first sees Jealousy at her altars, then Priapus, and finally the broken bows of Diana’s followers and the painted depictions of the lovers. The ultimate experience of the prayer is the encounter of Venus herself, in the heart of the temple. Chaucer rearranges these details, however, introducing Venus early in the narrator’s stroll, and ending with the broken bows and lovers’ stories. As Edwards notes, this rearrangement places the “stories of catastrophic love affairs [...] in the final and most emphatic position,”<sup>49</sup> and Hewitt argues that the effect of this reversal “fragment[s] and [devalues] the love goddess’s claim to priority and potency in the love vision.”<sup>50</sup> We have already seen a similar arrangement in *The House of Fame* when the narrator departs the temple after reading about Aeneas’s abandonment of Dido, allowing us to grasp Chaucer’s preferment of

duty to the chaos and destructiveness of love. And it is the last thing that his narrator sees before he comes across Nature.

We have already found Venus; she is “in a prive corner” (260), nearly obscured by the initial darkness of the temple; she is contained with the temple, unwilling (or perhaps unable) to leave until “the hote sonne gan to weste” (266). This is a sharp contrast to Nature, who is discovered in a glade “upon an hil of floures” (302). Although Chaucer uses “noble” to describe each goddess, Nature clearly leaves a more favorable impression upon the narrator; we are told that “ther sat a queene / That, as of light the somer sonne shene / Passeth the sterre, right so over mesure / She fayrer was than any creature” (298-301). The world of Venus is passive, relying on artificial (and consequently weaker) light, whereas the natural world itself provides a bower for the goddess Nature in which nothing is obscured. In other words, the love represented by Venus and the paintings on the wall, through the invocation of Dante, becomes undesirable to the narrator; it is a passing fancy, forgotten once he encounters Nature.

Charles McDonald has already commented on how we are prepared for this dichotomy; the gate through which the narrator passes at the beginning of the vision symbolizes two types of love: “love according to Nature, which promises ever-green joy, and love of a more courtly kind which leads to barren sorrow and despair.”<sup>51</sup> Clearly Chaucer does not envision a paradise along the lines of Froissart’s *Paradis d’Amour*, where we find Tristan and Iseult disporting themselves in the God of Love’s company on a large plain; for Froissart, Nature and Venus would be allied and

equal. Chaucer, however, aligns the lovers with death and destruction—a love that cannot bear the light of day and which is contrary to nature.

However, Chaucer goes one step further through his addition of Iseult to the catalogue of lovers. Píramus and Thisbe and Paris and Helen were already paired respectively in Boccaccio and Dante, and of the additional “inspired” names, Chaucer does not complete the pairs; where is Criseyde to complement Troilus, or the lover of Candace, whether it be Alexander or her brother? Dante does not mention Iseult explicitly, as he does Helen. This may have been an oversight; after all, he notes that Virgil shows him thousands of lovers, and it may be implied that she is among them. Or, perhaps as a female, she is easily overlooked; her sin is not seen as great as that of Helen.

Thus Tristan and Iseult are branded as carnal lovers, along with several others; but as noted above in the discussion of *The House of Fame*, Tristan and Iseult also deal with the issue of choice, or will, which as Kathryn Lynch has noted, is *The Parliament’s* “most central, motivating, or pivotal problem.”<sup>52</sup> Yet again Chaucer presents a contrasting set of traditions; in *The House of Fame*, the story of Dido and Aeneas is set against that of Tristan and Iseult—duty to the gods and destiny versus desire for the beloved. Now we have another contrast—Tristan and Iseult versus the formel and her three tercels<sup>53</sup>—and once more we find artifice versus nature, or per Joan Tasker Grimbert, *amour fatal* versus *amour chevaleresque*. Love which is selfish and destructive versus love which serves society.

Let me briefly summarize the tercels' arguments. The first, or royal, tercel insists that he will always love the formel. The second tercel insists that he has served the formel longer than the first. And the third tercel insists that he is the formel's truest man. As Hamlet would say, "Words, words, words."<sup>54</sup> Many critics linger on the formel's refusal to choose; she is challenging nature, being disruptive, et cetera.<sup>55</sup> But how is she to decide from among these suitors? We may for a moment be briefly reminded of Marie de France's *Chaitivel*, where four knights tragically strive to attain glory in the eyes of the beloved, or even Chaucer's own *Knight's Tale*, where the happy resolution can only be achieved through the death of a noble knight. Chaucer nearly takes this route when he has the terslet declare, "I can not se that arguments avayle: / Thanne semeth it there moste be batayle'" (538-39), but he skillfully avoids such tragedy by returning the question to the formel. Although Nature tells the formel that "If I were Resoun, thenne wolde I / Conseyle yow the royal tercel take" (632-33), we (and the formel) recognize that the presiding deity is Nature, not Reason, and cannot judge accordingly; it is no surprise, then that the formel cannot do so either. These tercels cannot be distinguished from one another.

Furthermore, although we have followed the narrator to the realm of Nature, leaving behind the courtly world of artifice, the tercels insist on adhering to the codes of courtly love—each tercel insists upon the greatness of his loyalty and suffering. Like the seventh group of petitioners in *The House of Fame*, however, they have not performed any deeds by which to earn the formel's love; as the rest of the parliament of birds complains, "How sholde a juge eyther parti leve / For ye or nay withouten

any preve?'" (496-97). They are neither effective natural lovers, because the formel does not have her heart already set on one of them, nor are they successful courtly lovers. In fact, as McDonald notes, the royal tercel violates the fundamental requirement of secrecy,<sup>56</sup> as suggested by the formel's response: "Ryght so for shame al wexen gan the hewe / Of this formel, whan she herde al this" (444-45).

The only indication of suffering and loyalty apparent are on the part of the formel, as she is ashamed by the tercel's violation of loyalty to the conditions determined by Nature only moments prior to the royal tercel's speech. Nature specifies the terms by which matches shall be made; that is, "she agre to his eleccioun, / Whoso he be that shulde be hire feere" (409-10). However, the royal tercel resists this requirement, addressing the formel as "'my soverayn lady, and not my fere'" (416).<sup>57</sup> By placing himself in the subservient position of the courtly lover, rather than the natural position of complementing equal, the tercel introduces an element of artifice that, as the first half of the dream vision suggests, would doom the resultant coupling, and the other two tercels follow his example. Chaucer may have had in mind a passage from Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, in which his narrator attempts to convince the personified Frankness that men such as Lancelot and Tristan suffer more greatly and are more loyal than women. Frankness's response suggests a motive other than love for such behavior:

If Tristan and Lancelot  
Were valiant, I dare well say  
That their valor and prowess

Meant glory, honor, and riches to them . . . (2957-60)<sup>58</sup>

As Frankness suggests, the suffering of knights helps to ensure their place in history, rather than in the hearts of women. Thus the formel recognizes that the three tercels do not seek her love, but are merely acting a part, adopting the mannerisms and voice of the courtly lover. As McDonald notes, the formel rejects “for the time being at least, the personages in the garden most commonly associated with courtly love poetry.”<sup>59</sup>

Let us return to Iseult. As is customary with many romance marriages, she is given by her father, and has no voice in the matter.<sup>60</sup> Unknowingly, she is given a love potion which further restricts her will; she will love whomever she sees immediately after drinking the potion, whether it be Mark, as intended, or Tristan, as fate would have it. The love potion is, in a word, unnatural—it is contrary to everything that the goddess Nature represents, and its close linguistic affiliation with “poison” is no coincidence. However, in Chaucer’s *Parliament*, protected by Nature and removed from the artificial strictures of the Temple of Venus, the formel exercises her will. Because she cannot choose a mate based on the options that have been presented to her, she will delay her decision for one year. Her wording is deliberate and telling, signaling her rejection of the courtly world to which Iseult is bound: “‘I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide’” (652).

Given Chaucer’s attitude towards love developed throughout his poetry, the idea of a love that is so compelling as to override all boundaries of social propriety must have struck Chaucer as outrageous, if not morally offensive. The purpose of the



parliament is very clear: as Nature notes, the birds are to choose their mates ““in fortheryng of youre nede”” (384), and when the tercels argue *ad nauseam* as to their imagined merits, the rest of the birds cry out, ““allas, ye wol us shende!”” (494). If nature is disrupted, extinction is the result. Iseult, whether through the potency of the potion or through choice,<sup>61</sup> continues to disrupt society through her love with Tristan; consequently, Mark is left without an heir and loses the trust of his subjects.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, Chaucer neatly avoids such a tangle. The formel must neither enter into an unnatural relationship nor disrupt society—the other birds must mate, and through the formel’s decision to delay, society will be preserved.<sup>63</sup>

#### V. *The Legend of Good Women* and the Downfall of Society

It is in Chaucer’s final dream vision that he most closely mirrors his French contemporaries in his use of the Arthurian legend; however, at the same time, Chaucer continues his condemnation of Tristan and Iseult. We find, in both versions of the prologue of *The Legend of Good Women*, a *balade* sung by the narrator for the God of Love, which makes a brief reference, once again, to Iseult: “Hyde ye youre beautes, Ysoude and Eleyne: / My lady cometh, that al this may disteyne” (F.254-55).<sup>64</sup> Through the comparison of this line, the beauty of the narrator’s lady is understood to exceed greatly that of Iseult and Helen. Thus not only does Chaucer place Iseult among the company of women accompanying the God of Love, hinting that a tale recounting the suffering of Iseult for love will be contained in the finished

product; he also pairs her with Helen of Troy—a figure who represents an “emblem of discord.”<sup>65</sup>

As Florence Percival notes, the *balade* beginning “Hyd, Absolon” (F.249) has “several analogues in contemporary French poetry, although it is not a precise translation of any.”<sup>66</sup> Among these analogues are Froissart’s *Balade VI*, the catalogue of lovers in Froissart’s *Paradis d’Amours*, Machaut’s rondel in *Le Livre dou Voir Dit*, and a handful of lyrics by Deschamps.<sup>67</sup> Roland M. Smith argues that Froissart’s *Balade VI* is closest to Chaucer’s in both its substance and its use of stanzaic form.<sup>68</sup> Structure aside, Froissart’s *balade* is also the closest to Chaucer’s in that it expresses the idea that the lady’s beauty eclipses all others. In each of these catalogues, few details are presented about each lady; clearly the narrator relies on audience recognition. In addition, the women of these catalogues are not denigrated in any way with the *balade*. Iseult is presented as a woman of great beauty; there is no reference to her infidelity to her husband Mark, or her incestuous relationship with Tristan—just as such references are absent in the poems of Deschamps, Machaut, and Froissart.<sup>69</sup>

However, the larger context into which this charming *balade* has been placed suggests that Chaucer’s attitude toward Iseult is negative, and echoes his dispraise of her in his earlier dream visions. I argue that Chaucer intended to include a tale recounting Iseult’s sufferings, one which would expand on his dislike of the Tristan motif, but either the tale was never written or it was, in the manner of Chaucer’s “book of the Leoun,”<sup>70</sup> consigned to oblivion. After all, Chaucer’s narrator

references nineteen women in the poem; the same number accompany the God of Love: “Behynde this god of love, upon the grene, / I saugh comyng of ladyes nyntene” (F.282-83). It is not unreasonable to suppose that the women referenced in the narrator’s balade will provide the substance of his *Seintes Legende of Cupide*. Of the ten extant legends, eight of the heroines appear in the “Hyd, Absolon” *balade*; only Medea and Philomela are excluded. Furthermore, the God of Love’s instructions to the narrator in Text F of the prologue are as follows:

Thise other ladies sittynge here arowe  
 Ben in thy balade, yf thou kanst hem knowe,  
 And *in thy bookes alle* [my italics] thou shalt hem fynde.  
 Have hem now in thy legende al in mynde... (F.554-57)

There are two things to note from this quotation. First, the nineteen ladies accompanying the God of Love have been referenced in the narrator’s song—clearly Iseult is among them. Second, the narrator (and therefore Chaucer as author) possesses books in which each of the women appear. Therefore, Chaucer’s inclusion of Iseult in the *balade* signals that he knows the legend, and by placing Iseult among the company of women surrounding the God of Love, Chaucer signals his dislike of her. Although Iseult is a loyal and beautiful lover, she is disruptive and foolish, just like the other women whose legends are extant.

As Percival notes, “Pretending to praise, pretending to sympathize, is a well-known technique of irony, especially when the topic is the praise or ‘dispraise’ of women,”<sup>71</sup> and this idea certainly applies to *The Legend of Good Women*. Thus the

poem invites us to scrutinize the instructions of Alceste given to the narrator: he is to write “Of women trewe in lovyng al hire lyve, / Wherso ye wol, of mayden or of wyve” (F.438-39). Iseult, as represented by the French poets with whom Chaucer was familiar, clearly belongs in this category, for as discussed above in the section on *The House of Fame*, Iseult is irrevocably bound to Tristan, and cannot exist without him—and the irony of her inclusion in this group lies with the compelling nature of the love potion.

Alceste also instructs the narrator to “telle of false men that hem bytraien” (F.486). Although the French *dits* consistently present Tristan as the most loyal of lovers, there is a tradition which, as William Calin notes, renders Tristan as guilty of lack of trust in his beloved.<sup>72</sup> According to the Anglo-Norman Thomas, an exiled Tristan pines for his beloved, tormenting himself with the image of Iseult in the arms of her husband, King Mark. Convinced that Iseult of Ireland has forsaken him, Tristan marries Iseult of the White Hands, only to be reminded of his primary vow to Iseult of Ireland by a ring (a present from the Irish Iseult) on his wedding night. Thus Thomas’s Tristan bears a close resemblance to Chaucer’s faithless lovers; his forsaking of both Iseults mirrors Paris’s desertion of Oenone, and his betrayal of Iseult of Ireland through his marriage to Iseult of the White Hands may be compared to Theseus’s betrayal of Adriadne.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, the extant legends continue the motif, discussed above with *The House of Fame*, of the lover who abandons duty for desire—yet another type of betrayal, one which seems particularly egregious to Chaucer. For example, in *The*

*Legend of Cleopatra*, we are told that Anthony is “a ful worthy gentil werreyour” (597); however, his love for Cleopatra causes him to “all the world [ . . . ] sette at no value” (602).<sup>74</sup> As Calin notes, *The Legend of Good Women* “present[s] a favourable picture of woman but they treat legendary figures some of whom (Cleopatra, Dido, Medea) were generally considered in pejorative terms during the medieval period.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, the inclusion of Iseult in this group only serves to solidify Chaucer’s negative attitude towards her character. In addition, when Iseult is invoked in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, she is paired with a figure of treachery and social disaster—Helen of Troy—in order to fully establish the destructive aspect of her love.

Nor is this the first time that Tristan and Iseult are linked to the downfall of Troy, for in *The Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer places both directly alongside Paris: “Tristram, Isaude, Paris, and Achilles, / Eleyne, Cleopatre” (290-91). Although both women are largely passive, the abduction of these beauties results in the destruction of a society. As Christopher Baswell notes, Helen’s “near-divine beauty is universally acknowledged, but the lust it arouses and the historical chaos it produces are emphasized above all.”<sup>76</sup> Although some medieval audiences respond favorably to the Tristan and Iseult legend (for example, Peter of Blois, secretary to Eleanor of Aquitaine, comments on the ability of the story to prompt tears of compassion<sup>77</sup>), Chaucer’s dislike stems from Tristan’s inability to mature and become a productive member of society. Whereas Lancelot consistently performs deeds of service to his kingdom, Tristan’s time is typically devoted to developing elaborate guises to obtain

access to Iseult, or to lamenting her absence. This is not the example of *fin' amor* which Chaucer learns from the *Roman de la Rose*.

## VI. *Conclusion*—Arthurian Absences

Yet another Arthurian couple is often associated with the downfall of a society: Lancelot and Guinevere. After all, it is Lancelot's love for Guinevere which polarizes the Arthurian court and allows Mordred the opportunity to seize the British crown. However, notable differences occur between the narratives of Lancelot and Tristan. For example, as Calin notes in his study on the French tradition in medieval English literature, "The *Prose Lancelot*, like the romances of Chrétien, is, in part, anti-Tristan. Lancelot and Guinevere are adulterous, it is true, but the cause of their adultery is praiseworthy (*fin' amor*); its commission is justified in the narrative (King Arthur commits adultery with Camille); and its effect is to enhance the glory of the Arthurian world."<sup>78</sup> I would add to Calin's comments the fact that Lancelot and Guinevere are true to one another throughout their lives, unlike Tristan and Iseult, who are joined forever merely by the power of the love potion. Furthermore, both Lancelot and Guinevere ultimately contribute to society through their sincere repentance and service to God in their final years.<sup>79</sup> Chaucer's *Retraction* and the placement of the *Parson's Tale*, with its emphasis on penance, at the end of the extant tales in the *Canterbury Tales* sequence indicates that, in Chaucer's mind, the final salvation of the soul is paramount to the material life;

therefore, the atonement of Lancelot and Guinevere would attract Chaucer while the selfishness of Tristan and Iseult would repel him. As Calin notes, “Neither [Tristan or Iseult] speaks of an afterlife, in heaven or hell, or of salvation and its opposite;”<sup>80</sup> their final thoughts are of only each other. Although the protagonist of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* mirrors Tristan to some extent in his obsession with Criseyde, he is redeemed (albeit in death) when he can finally wrench his gaze away from his beloved and fix it upon the heavens. Such an action is impossible for either Tristan or Iseult.

Although Kennedy argues that “Chaucer mentions no specific details from the *Tristan* story, and his allusions [...] could be derived from the poetry of others,”<sup>81</sup> the contexts into which his few allusions to Tristan and Iseult are placed and the ways in which Chaucer’s usage differs from that of the French poets suggests otherwise—that Chaucer is indeed familiar with this aspect of the Arthurian narrative. At the same time, Chaucer does not simply plug in names as he finds them in his French contemporaries. If this were the case, then we would find many more references to Lancelot and Guinevere; instead, we have only two references to Lancelot (both of which occur in *The Canterbury Tales*) and none to Guinevere.<sup>82</sup> While the French love poets often do not distinguish between Lancelot and Tristan (in fact, Tristan does not appear in the *dits* outside of Lancelot’s company), I argue that Chaucer sees a difference between these two lovers. As a result, Chaucer is free to express his dislike for the Tristan and Iseult component of the Arthurian legend. He does not link Tristan and Lancelot together because he views them as completely different types of

lovers (*amour fatal* versus *amour chevaleresque*). Although Tristan's story is tragic, his sort of love is passé and contrary to that found in the *Roman de la Rose*.

Lancelot's story, on the other hand, has a moral which could appeal to and instruct a fourteenth-century audience. Chaucer is sympathetic to Lancelot and Guinevere, and so will not cast them in the traditional role of the suffering lover and beloved. Instead, as I argue in the next chapter, Chaucer's interest in the Lancelot and Guinevere aspect of the Arthurian myth is so pervasive that it directs his adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. At the same time, however, Chaucer remains a court poet, as indicated by his *Book of the Duchess* and *The Legend of Good Women*, and the desires of the court still shape his writings. Because the Arthurian legend is considered to be passé in fourteenth-century England, as Loomis and others have suggested, we find only traces of it on the surface of Chaucer's writings. Yet as I argue in the following chapters, once we peel back the initial layer, we find an intricate web of allusions throughout Chaucer's major writings which reveal his rejection of the courtly dismissal of the Arthurian myth.



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<sup>1</sup> Edward Donald Kennedy, "Gower, Chaucer, and French Prose Arthurian Romance," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993, for 1990): 56. Charles Muscatine holds a similar view, arguing that Chaucer's "style is most compendiously and clearly described as stemming from the traditions originated and propagated, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in France" (*Chaucer and the French Tradition* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966]).

<sup>2</sup> An additional allusion to Tristan occurs in Chaucer's ballade "To Rosemounde"; however, I have limited my current discussion of the Tristan allusions to the dream visions.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy 58.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas of England's *Tristan* and the Oxford MS of *La Folie Tristan*, for example, suggest that the potion's effect remains consistent throughout their lives.

<sup>5</sup> Although the sole surviving manuscript of Béroul's *Tristran* dates from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional date of composition is believed to be around 1190. See Norris J. Lacy, ed., "Introduction: Béroul's *Tristran*" (*Early French Tristan Poems*, vol. 1. [Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1998]) 3, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Chrétien claims, in his *Cliges*, to have written a poem about Tristan and Iseult; however, it has not survived (Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* [Mineola: Dover, 2000] 74).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Chrétien echoes the motif of the bloody sheets in his *Chevalier de la Charrete*. Lori J. Walters suggests that Chrétien's *Chevalier* was a response to the Tristan narratives ("Introduction," *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters [New York: Routledge, 1996]).

<sup>8</sup> Lacy, "Introduction: Béroul's *Tristran*," 5.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy 59-60. Kennedy also points out that only one manuscript of Béroul's romance survives, and five fragments of Thomas's version exist; over 86 manuscripts of the prose *Tristan* remain, attesting to its popularity in the Middle Ages. Eileen Power, Edith Rickert, and Margaret Deanesly list several versions of the narrative appearing in wills in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M.M. Postan [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975] 85; Edith Rickert, "King Richard II's Books," *The Library* 4.13 (1932-3): 145-46; Margaret Deanesly, "Vernacular Books in England in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Modern Language Review* 15 [1920]: 350.n.5).

<sup>10</sup> I am not attempting to prove that Chaucer had read either Béroul or Thomas d'Angleterre; however, I would argue that Chaucer has been indirectly exposed to the legend via the French *dits* of Machaut et al.

<sup>11</sup> With the notable exception of Froissart's lengthy Arthurian poem *Meliador*, which is believed to have been completed towards the end of the 1370s, and which it is unlikely, due to its small circulation, that Chaucer was exposed to it.

<sup>12</sup> See James Wimsatt's *Chaucer and the French love poets* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968) for a more complete discussion of Chaucer's debt to Machaut. Also see *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues*, ed. and trans. B.A. Windeatt (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Translation is from Guillaume de Machaut, *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. and trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland, 1988). “Li bons Lancelos et Tristans / Eurent plus de peinne .x. tans / Que femme ne porroit souffrir / Tant se peust a peinne offrir, / Et cent fois furent plus loiaus / Que Jason ne fu desloiaus...” (2841-46)

<sup>14</sup> A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 50.

<sup>15</sup> All textual references to Chaucer are from the Riverside Chaucer.

<sup>16</sup> Translation is from *The Romance of Tristan: The Thirteenth-Century Old French ‘Prose Tristan’*, trans. Renée L. Curtis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 317. “‘Muire quant Diex plaira, car certes je li ferai compaignie celui jour! Se Diex m’ament, je m’ocirrai celui jour, si fineront mes dolours!’” (*La fin des aventures de Tristan de de Galaad. Le Roman de Tristan en Prose*, ed. Laurence Harf-Lancner, vol. IX [Genève: Librairie Droz, 1997] 77.52-54.).

<sup>17</sup> Also Deschamps, in his Ballad CCCLXVIII, indicates that Lancelot has a “cuer bon.”

<sup>18</sup> Translation is from Jean Froissart, *An Anthology of Narrative & Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. Kristen M. Figg, R. Baron Palmer (New York: Routledge, 2001) 103-266. “Je finerai ensi que fist tristrans / Car je morrai pour amer par amours” (1476-77).

<sup>19</sup> “Achilles ne narcissus / Ne euchalions / Tristrans paris los ne jasons / Nen eurent viers moi grammant plus” (1151-54).

<sup>20</sup> Dean 158.

<sup>21</sup> Catherine Batt and Rosalind Field, “Romance Tradition,” *The Arthur of the English: the Arthurian legend in medieval English life and literature*, ed. W.R.J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999) 62.

<sup>22</sup> As Anne Rooney notes, “References to [Tristan’s] expertise as a hunter are often casual, suggesting that his reputation was well-established and familiar” (*Hunting in Middle English Literature* [Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993] 86).

<sup>23</sup> Rooney 146.

<sup>24</sup> William Calin, *The French tradition and the literature of medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 42.

<sup>25</sup> Technically, this is the request of the sixth group; however, the seventh group asks Lady Fame to “‘graunte us sone / The same thing, the same bone, / That [ye] this nexte folk hen done’” (1773-75).

<sup>26</sup> “Lanscelos tristrans lyonniel / Porrus le baudrain cassiuel / Paris et tamaint damoisiel / Nont pas este / Ame pour seul dire il mest biel / Dame quor prendes ce capiuel / Et me donnes sans nul rapiel / Vostre amiste / Nennil ains en ont bien livre / A grant martire leur sante” (2308-17).

<sup>27</sup> French quotations and translations from Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre dou Voir Dit (The Book of the True Poem)*, ed. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland, 1998). “Et mon tresdous cuer vous savez comment pyramus et tysbe • que on avoit enferme en divers lieux pour ce que il ne se veissent • quirent voie par quoy il se peussent veoir • Comment leandon passoit .j. bras de mer a

no • pour aler veoir sa dame qui autrement ne pooit aler • Et comment la chasteleinne de vergi quist voie pour aler veoir son amy • Et commentancelos passa le pont de lespee • et tout ce faisoient pour amour de leurs dames” (456-57).

<sup>28</sup> “est damours dossi drois neus / Que pour tristran en fu la belle yseus / Et genevre pour lanscelot le preus” (2767-69).

<sup>29</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2004). “Tristrans ob potum, quem Brangweyne in nau ei porrexit, de amore Bele Isolde inebriatus extitit” (467 ff.).

<sup>30</sup> “Dou feu damour qui maint coer mine / Telement fu examines / Que jusques en le fin menes” (3363-65).

<sup>31</sup> Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989) 117.

<sup>32</sup> Calin 167.

<sup>33</sup> Calin 48.

<sup>34</sup> Joan Tasker Grimbert, Introduction, *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1995) xxxvii.

<sup>35</sup> Grimbert xxxvii.

<sup>36</sup> Grimbert xvi.

<sup>37</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 217.

<sup>38</sup> Kennedy 60.

<sup>39</sup> Kathleen Hewitt, “‘Ther it was first’: Dream Poetics in the *Parliament of Fowls*,” *The Chaucer Review* 24.1 (1989): 25.

<sup>40</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Theseid of the Nuptials of Emilia (Teseida delle Nozze di Emilia)*, trans. Vincenzo Traversa (New York: Peter Lang, 2002) 494. “Videvvi storie per tutto dipinte / intra le quali compiu alto lavoro / dela sposa dinino vidde distinte / lopare tutte evide epie del moro / pirramo etisbe eggia le gielssse tinte / ed elgrande erchole vidde tra costoro / ingrenbo a Iole eblibis dolorosa / andar pregando cauno piatosa” (220).

<sup>41</sup> Translation from Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno, The Divine Comedy*, trans. Mark Musa, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). “Elena vedi, per cui tanto reo / tempo so volse...” (V.64-65).

<sup>42</sup> “Vedi Parìs, Tristano”; e più di mille / ombre mostrommi e nominommi a dito, ch’amor di nostra vita dipartille” (V.67-69).

<sup>43</sup> Bennett comments that Chaucer triples the number of lovers from Boccaccio in his *The Parlement of Foules: An Interpretation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957) 101, 102; and links Chaucer’s list to Dante. He also explores the parallels between Dante’s journey through the circles of Hell and that of Chaucer’s narrator through the park. Gerald Morgan justifies Chaucer’s addition of five names because “Virgil shows Dante the pilgrim more than a thousand such lovers and mentions them by name. . . . Presumably Chaucer considers that the addition of five more lovers will be sufficient for his purpose” (“Chaucer’s Adaptation of Boccaccio’s Temple of Venus

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in *The Parliament of Fowls*,” *The Review of English Studies* 56.223 [February 2005]: 35.n.142.).

<sup>44</sup> Morgan 35.

<sup>45</sup> Bennett 104.

<sup>46</sup> Helen Cooney, “The *Parlement of Foules*: A Theodicy of Love,” *Chaucer Review* 32.4 (1998): 357.

<sup>47</sup> Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante: A Revaluation* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1984) 98.

<sup>48</sup> Bennett 42.

<sup>49</sup> Edwards 136.

<sup>50</sup> Hewitt 25.

<sup>51</sup> Charles O. McDonald, “An Interpretation of Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules*,” *Speculum* 30.3 (Jul. 1955): 447.

<sup>52</sup> Kathryn L. Lynch, “The *Parliament of Fowls* and Late Medieval Voluntarism: Part I,” *The Chaucer Review* 25.1 (1990): 1-16.

<sup>53</sup> The other Chaucerian text in which birds play a prominent role is *The Squire’s Tale*, whose Arthurian references will be discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>54</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.191-192.

<sup>55</sup> Jack B. Oruch summarizes many scholarly approaches to the *demande d’amour* in “Nature’s Limitations and the *Demande d’Amour* of Chaucer’s *Parlement*,” *The Chaucer Review* 18.1 (1983): 23-37.

<sup>56</sup> McDonald 452.

<sup>57</sup> Chaucer develops this theme further in the Franklin’s tale in *The Canterbury Tales*. Arveragus initially attempts to grant his wife sovereignty; however, by the end of the tale, the traditional patriarchal hierarchy has been re-established.

<sup>58</sup> “Et se Tristans ou Lancelos / Furent vaillans, bien dire l’os / Que leur vaillance et leur prouesse / Leur fu gloire, honneur, et richesse” (2957-60).

<sup>59</sup> McDonald 454.

<sup>60</sup> Chaucer explores this motif through a slightly different genre, that of the secular saint’s life (although some scholars group this tale with the romances); in the pilgrim Man of Law’s tale of Custaunce in *The Canterbury Tales*, Custaunce is divinely guided from the husband chosen by her father to Alla.

<sup>61</sup> Although some traditions held that the love potion lost its effect after three years, Tristan and Iseult continue to love each other intensely from the moment that they imbibe the potion.

<sup>62</sup> When Tristan and Iseult are first discovered, the common people threaten to rebel against Mark, whom they believe have accused the queen wrongfully—of course, Mark does deny Tristan and Iseult a trial, and it may be this to which the commoners are reacting. Elsewhere, however, when Mark refuses to believe his nobles when they tell him of Iseult’s infidelity, they too threaten to rebel against him.

<sup>63</sup> Dismayed by the destruction that the love between herself and Lancelot has caused, Guinevere exercises a similar display of will when she retires from the world to a nunnery. This topic will be explored more fully in Chapters 2 and 3.

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<sup>64</sup> The same line appears in Text G at lines 208-09; the only difference is that the “My lady cometh” in Text F is changed to “Alceste is here” in Text G. All quotations from *The Legend of Good Women* are from Text F, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher C. Baswell, Paul Beekman Taylor, “The Faire Queene Eleyne in Chaucer’s *Troilus*,” *Speculum* 63.2 (April 1988): 294.

<sup>66</sup> Florence Percival, *Chaucer’s Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 45.

<sup>67</sup> F.N. Robinson discusses the parallels between Chaucer’s *balade* and the last three texts mentioned above in the notes to his *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*.

<sup>68</sup> Roland M. Smith, “Five Notes on Chaucer and Froissart,” *Modern Language Notes* 66.1 (1951): 30.

<sup>69</sup> Gower, however, does focus, albeit briefly, on her infidelity, in both Book VI of the *Confessio Amantis*, as discussed above, and in the Latin glosses of his *Traitié* (section XV).

<sup>70</sup> *Retraction* 1087.

<sup>71</sup> Percival 4.

<sup>72</sup> Calin 51.

<sup>73</sup> The *Prose Tristan* follows Thomas’s example of Tristan’s despair and failure to trust Iseult.

<sup>74</sup> Chaucer also repeats the story of Dido and Aeneas in his *Legend of Good Women*.

<sup>75</sup> Calin 299.

<sup>76</sup> Baswell 295.

<sup>77</sup> Melissa Furrow, “Artists Reading Romance: The Tryst beneath the Tree,” *Dalhousie Review* 82.1 (April 2002): 29.

<sup>78</sup> Calin 145.

<sup>79</sup> This idea is explored more fully in my discussion of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* in Chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> Calin 57.

<sup>81</sup> Kennedy 60.

<sup>82</sup> Aside from, of course, the reference to Arthur’s unnamed queen in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*.

## PART I: ARTHURIAN (DIS)APPEARANCES

CHAPTER 2: LANCELOT AND *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

One would not typically associate Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* with any aspect of the Arthurian legend, particularly not the character of Lancelot. Although it too deals with a tragic love and the downfall of a city, the story is set against the fall of Troy, which takes place centuries before the advent of the Round Table. Therefore, it would be anachronistic to mention Lancelot outright. But, as Chaucer no doubt discovered from his French sources, such as the *dits* of Machaut and Froissart, the knights of the Round Table frequently appear alongside the heroes of antiquity. In this next chapter, therefore, I examine Chaucer's Trojan tragedy through the lens of French Arthurian romance, drawing parallels between Chaucer's character of Troilus and the flower of chivalry, Lancelot. As in the first chapter, I follow in the footsteps of Muscatine and Calin, rejecting the idea of the evolution from a French Chaucer to an Italian Chaucer over the course of his literary career; instead, I argue (along with Muscatine and Calin) that Chaucer draws from both traditions, rather than only one, in his adaptation of Giovanni Boccaccio's mid-fourteenth-century *Il Filostrato*. In this chapter, I focus on the emerging parallels between *Troilus and Criseyde* and a variety of Arthurian romances, namely the thirteenth-century Prose *Lancelot*, Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century *Chevalier de la Charrette*, and the thirteenth-century *La Mort le Roi Artus*.

For the most part, Chaucer retains the basic plot of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. In both versions, a Trojan prince (Troilo in the Italian, and Troilus in the Middle English) falls desperately in love with the abandoned daughter of the traitorous Calchas. Although the lover wins the lady, their time together is short, for the father (who has defected to the Greeks) arranges to have his daughter (Criseida in the Italian, and Criseyde in the Middle English) exchanged for one of the Trojan's warriors. The beloved swears to remain true to her Trojan prince; however, she soon shifts allegiance to a Greek warrior, and Troilus dies, grief-stricken, in battle. However, Chaucer is quite free in his treatment of Boccaccio's narrative, particularly in his depiction of Troilus. That is, whereas Boccaccio's *Filostrato* presents the main character as an active and self-possessed lover, Chaucer's adaptation depicts his Troilus as subject to the pangs of love. When we place the *Filostrato* and *Troilus* side-by-side, therefore, a pattern of textual differences emerges, and taken as a whole, suggests that Troilus's experience of love more closely resembles that of Lancelot as he appears in both the Prose *Lancelot* and Chrétien's *Charrete*, rather than that of Boccaccio's Troilo. Thus, I argue that Chaucer's character of Troilus is a thinly disguised Lancelot, based on textual parallels which include the use of poetic devices such as battle imagery as well as the defining character traits and behaviors. I argue that the changes introduced by Chaucer to Boccaccio's narrative invoke the Arthurian knight. That is, throughout the first half of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the audience is encouraged to identify Troilus with Lancelot.<sup>1</sup> Following the debate between Love and Reason in Book Four, however, the similarities end. While it is impossible to

confirm or deny Chaucer's knowledge of these stories, nonetheless, *Troilus and Criseyde* itself suggests at the very least a cultural knowledge of the tradition of Lancelot, and through a close comparison between Troilus and Lancelot, the reader becomes aware of the causes of Troilus's emotional and spiritual paralysis. Whereas Lancelot emerges as the paragon of action, finding a delicate balance between the complementing forces of Reason and Love, Troilus, by comparison to Lancelot, is revealed instead to be clinging desperately to Reason, and ultimately loses everything which he holds dear.

#### I. Traces of Tristan and Iseult

Before I turn to the ways in which Chaucer's tale of Troy evokes the Lancelot narrative, however, I would like to briefly deal with a possible allusion to the Tristan and Iseult legend. After all, the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde* precedes Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, and Chapter 1 explores the various allusions found to Tristan and Iseult in three of the dream visions. In the second book of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, while watching Troilus return from battle with the Greeks, Criseyde succumbs to a strange emotion: "Criseyda gan al his chere asprien, / And leet it so softe in hire herte synke, / That to hireself she seyde, 'Who yaf me drynke?'" (2.649-51).<sup>2</sup> Initially determined to resist Pandarus's attempts to involve her romantically with the Trojan prince, Criseyde now finds herself powerless at the sight of the bloodied warrior, and immediately withdraws, blushing, from her



window. However, in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, we find no such reaction. Instead, Criseida stands calmly at one of her windows to allow Troilo to view her: "at all times over her right shoulder she gazed toward him modestly" (2.82).<sup>3</sup> Whereas Boccaccio's Criseida has already examined the situation in a lengthy debate with herself before Troilo appears on the scene, Chaucer chooses to elaborate on his heroine's experience, allowing her a brief inner monologue to illustrate with what force and speed love seizes her. Yet his choice of the word "drynke" is intriguing, especially when considered in light of the references to the legend of Tristan and Iseult in the dream visions, discussed in Chapter 1.<sup>4</sup>

As discussed in the conclusion of the previous chapter, I argue that Chaucer distinguishes between the types of love represented by Tristan and Lancelot; to use Joan Tasker Grimbert's terminology, these two lovers depict *amour fatal* and *amour chevaleresque*, respectively. Therefore, although we do find some possible allusions to the Tristan narrative in the early sections of the romance, they are brief and deal only with the onset of the love affair. The parallels with the Lancelot legend, however, persist through all of *Troilus and Criseyde*. It is no surprise, though, to find allusions to both Lancelot and Tristan within the same text, for as Lori Walters notes, "By the fourteenth century, comparisons, both direct and implied, between Lancelot and Tristan and between the Lancelot-Guinevere and Tristan-Iseult pairings had become standard fare in the prose romances."<sup>5</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the French *dits* of Machaut, Froissart, Deschamps, and Gower frequently

pair Tristan with Lancelot. In other words, the presence of one often evoked the idea of the other.

## II. Drawing upon the Prose *Lancelot*—Troilus as the Chivalric Warrior

I turn now to the defining characteristics of Lancelot which appear in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Two major traits set Lancelot apart from the myriad of great knights within and outside of the Arthurian legend.<sup>6</sup> First, he is the greatest of all knights, possessing vast strength and prowess on the battlefield, easily invoking terror and admiration in his enemies. Off the battlefield, he is the flower of chivalry—courteous and humble. Of course, several other knights, such as Gawain and Hector, also bear the same epithet, but they lack Lancelot's other defining trait—an unswerving devotion to his beloved. The only other Arthurian lover who nears Lancelot in the depth of his commitment is Tristan; however, as discussed in the previous chapter, Tristan falls short as his love is not natural, having resulted from a magic potion. Lancelot's love, on the other hand, is deep, constant, and true, and propels him to heights of greatness far beyond any other Arthurian knight.

In constructing his main character, Chaucer retains a number of traits found already in Boccaccio's *Filostrato* and which are by no means exclusive to medieval romance. Yet at the same time, Chaucer introduces changes to Boccaccio's version which distance Troilus from Troilo while aligning him with Lancelot. For example, like Arthur's greatest knight, Boccaccio's Troilo is a great warrior already, and

Troilus in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* follows in his footsteps. These three warriors—Troilo, Troilus, and Lancelot—draw the attention of other warriors to their performances, and are reported to execute superhuman feats. Incognito as the Black Knight during Arthur's war with Galehout in the Prose *Lancelot*, "[Lancelot] jousted so skillfully that all the others left off their jousting and fighting so as to watch him" (2.132).<sup>7</sup> Lancelot's identity has not yet been revealed to Arthur's court, but prompted by his love for Queen Guinevere, he quickly gains a fearful reputation. In fact, Gawain, previously the greatest of Arthur's knights, "swore that to his knowledge no other man could have done as much" upon seeing Lancelot on the battlefield (2.132).<sup>8</sup> Like Lancelot, Boccaccio's Troilo is clearly one of the best warriors among the Trojans, and "those who happened to be watching saw him, more than any other, work marvels in arms" (1.45).<sup>9</sup> Chaucer does little to further enhance Troilus's achievements on the battlefield, and his description of Troilus's prowess remains similar to that in Boccaccio's text. Like Troilo, others affirm Troilus's skills on the battlefield:

The sharpe shoures felle of armes preve  
 That Ector or his othere brethren didn  
 Ne made hym only therefore ones meve  
 And yet was he, where so men wente or riden,  
 Founde oon the best, and longest tyme abiden  
 Ther peril was, and did eek swich travaille  
 In armes, that to thence it was merveille. (1.470-76)

In fact, these three warriors are so fierce in their deeds that their enemies tremble before them. Boccaccio writes that Troiolo “sallied forth from the city upon the Greeks so spirited and so strong and so fierce that everyone was afraid of him” (3.90).<sup>10</sup> Fear is powerful; however, dread is greater, and the latter is what Lancelot and Troilus invoke in their enemies. It is at this point that Chaucer’s Troilus begins to differ subtly from Boccaccio’s Troiolo—which heightens the parallels to the character of Lancelot. For example, despite their greater numbers, in the Prose *Lancelot*, Galehout’s men “were so terrorized by the wonders [Lancelot] performed that many turned their backs and went most shamefully straight back to their tents” (2.134).<sup>11</sup> Chaucer’s rendering of Troilus’s deeds, then, more closely echoes that of Lancelot as “Fro day to day in armes so he spedde / That the Grekes as the deth him dredde” (1.482-83). Later in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandarus describes Troilus’s battle prowess to Criseyde, indicating:

For nevere yet so thikke a swarm of been  
 Ne fleigh, as Grekes for hym gonne fleen,  
 And thorough the feld, in everi wightes eere,  
 Ther nas no cry but ‘Troilus is there!’ (2.193-96)

There is no corresponding passage in Boccaccio’s text to indicate that Troiolo causes his enemies to flee; only Lancelot and Troilus have such an effect on their adversaries.

Furthermore, Troilus and Lancelot are further connected by the poets’ use of imagery. There is no better way to emphasize marvelous deeds than to compare the

warrior in question with a creature renowned for its fierceness—the lion. In fact, the lion motif appears frequently throughout medieval literature; for example, in Chrétien’s *Yvain*, the main character is accompanied on part of his quest by a lion, and Guillaume de Machaut’s *Dit du Lyon* presents a situation in which a lion guides the narrator to a teacher of love. However, what interests me in regards to the three narratives under discussion here is the ways in which the main warrior is linked with the king of beasts metaphorically. For example, following the exchange of Antenor and Criseida, Troiolo’s brother talks him out of his stupor and onto the battlefield; Boccaccio describes the roused Troiolo as a famished lion.<sup>12</sup> However, Chaucer omits this reference (and the exchange between Troilus and his brother); instead, his lion imagery appears in the first book, and is used to describe Troilus in battle: “But Troilus lay tho no lenger down, / But up anon upon his stede bay, / And in the feld he pleyde tho leoun” (1.1072-74). The verb choice—“pleyde”—conjures an image of a playful lion romping through a field in a carefree manner. In the fifth book, Troilus is once again likened to the lion; we are told that he is “Yong, fressh, strong, and hardy as lyoun” (5.830). Compare these two descriptions of Troilus to when Lancelot engages the Saxons in the Prose *Lancelot*: “He resembled an angry lion that plunges among the does, not because of any great hunger it might have, but in order to show off its ferocity and its power” (2.234).<sup>13</sup> Both Chaucer and the anonymous author of the Prose *Lancelot* emphasize the extreme power of the lion—he kills not out of necessity, for he is not famished, unlike Boccaccio’s lion—rather, he kills simply because he has the power to do so.

The aftermath of battle provides additional testimony to a warrior's abilities—namely, the condition of the horse and armor yield evidence as to the fierceness of their bearers' efforts—and we have yet another difference between Boccaccio's Troilo and Chaucer's Troilus which serves to illustrate the latter's similarity to Lancelot. At the beginning of Chrétien's *Charrette*, a strange knight (whom we later learn to be Lancelot) appears on a nearly lifeless horse, and later rides the replacement horse (given by Gawain) to death. Several times in the Prose *Lancelot*, the title character loses his horse, only to continue to fight on foot, as he does so during Arthur's war with Galehaut.<sup>14</sup> In fact, when the Lady of Malehaut and her cousin examine Lancelot's horse following a similar battle, they “saw the knight's horse, with wounds on its head, its neck, its chest, and its legs, its bones visible in several places, and lying before its manger in very bad shape, neither eating nor drinking” (2.125).<sup>15</sup> However, Boccaccio's work makes no mention of Troilo's horse, either during or following battle. Yet Chaucer's version deviates from Boccaccio's in that he draws his audience's attention to Troilus's horse when the warrior returns through the streets of Troy: “wounded was his hors, and gan to blede” (2.626). Although Troilus's horse is not nearly in as bad shape as that of Lancelot's, the fact that Chaucer's work mentions the condition of the horse helps to further evoke the parallel between Troilus and Lancelot.

Yet the mention of the wounded horse is not the only addition to Chaucer's text that helps to bring Lancelot to mind. Considering the marvelous deeds that

Lancelot performs in battle, it is no surprise that when the Lady of Malehaut inspects his armor, she

found the hauberk deformed and full of great holes at the shoulders  
and along the arms and in many other points of the body. And his  
shield was split and broken and cut to pieces by sword-blows on the  
sides and from the summit to the boss, so that little remained of it, and  
what did remain was so pierced by blows of lances that in many spots  
one could thrust one's fist right through it. And his helmet was split  
and dented, the nasal was all cut to pieces, and the circlet hung down  
so that it could no longer be of use to him or to anyone else. (2.125)<sup>16</sup>

There is no description of Troilo's armor in the *Filostrato*, but once again, Chaucer adds to his tale of Troilus the following description of beleaguered armor:

His helm to hewen was in twenty places  
That by a tissew heng his bak behynde;  
His shield todashed was with swerdes and maces,  
In which men myghte many an arwe fynde  
That thirled hadde horn and nerf and rynde. (2.638-42)

Both the shields and the helmets of Lancelot and Troilus have been cut to pieces, with sections dangling uselessly and beyond repair. It is not enough for the narrator to affirm the warrior's prowess, as in the *Filostrato*; the audience must be given a visual confirmation.

Yet it is not sufficient for a warrior to possess great skill and stamina on the battlefield, for if he is a brute at court, he will receive little regard. Kay, for example, among the Arthurian knights, is often ridiculed and forced to fight for the opportunity to gain glory because of his foul personality.<sup>17</sup> The epithet “flower of chivalry” not only suggests the height of ability on horseback; such a warrior must also possess beauty—at the superficial level, but more importantly, at the internal—specifically, humility. Lancelot is clearly such a knight. From his first appearance at Arthur’s court, crowds flock to observe his physical comeliness. Such attention does not instill a haughty sense in him, however—instead, Lancelot shuns such acclaim. In the *Prose Lancelot*, when he first joins Arthur’s court, Lancelot is dismayed by his reception: “Sir Yvain and the others went on like that [praising his beautiful face] so long that the young man was quite overwhelmed” (2.64).<sup>18</sup> Once Lancelot begins to attain fame, he “came to the decision that he would go about in secret, so that he should not be recognized as a man bent on winning fame and honor” (2.73).<sup>19</sup> He does not seek notoriety; instead, his utmost goal is to defend the weak and suffering, as is shown in the episode of the wounded knight,<sup>20</sup> and often he beats a hasty retreat following his victories in order to avoid commendation.

Like Lancelot, the main character of *Troilus and Criseyde* is given a public face, thereby revealing Troilus’s humility. Although he initially appears arrogant as he strolls through the temple, mocking his fellows and eyeing the ladies present, Troilus is soon transformed by the ennobling powers of love. For example, when he is filled with hope because Pandarus has agreed to approach Criseyde on Troilus’s



behalf, Troilus “bicom the frendlieste wight, / The gentilest, and ek the mooste fre” (1.1079-80); the verb choice of “bicom” indicates that Troilus was previously not such a noble example. In addition, like Lancelot, Troilus now shuns receiving praise from society. While fierce in the midst of the battlefield, in town Troilus “So goodly was, and gat hym so in grace / That ecch hym loved that loked on his face” (1.1077-78). Upon returning to the city after a particularly successful military endeavor, Troilus finds himself lauded in the streets:

For which he wex a litel reed for shame  
 When he the peple upon hym herde cryen,  
 That to byholde it was a noble game  
 How sobrelich he caste down his yën. (2.645-48)

Like Lancelot, Troilus is overwhelmed by such public esteem, revealing his unassuming nature.

However, in Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*, there is no description of Troiolo’s public persona, and consequently no sense of his humility, which sets him further apart from the characters of Lancelot and Troilus. Perhaps the closest analogue occurs when Troiolo goes hunting; his talk is “of love or of good manners, and full of courtesy” (3.92).<sup>21</sup> however, courtesy is his subject, and not explicitly the opinion of the general public. Furthermore, in the scene above, Troilus’s journey through the streets of Troy takes him past the window of the watchful Criseyde; a similar scene appears in the *Filostrato*,<sup>22</sup> but whereas Chaucer comments on the people’s reception and Troilus’s subsequent reaction, Boccaccio merely recounts the action of the moment, with no

commentary: “She was standing at one of her windows, and was perhaps awaiting what happened; neither harsh no forbidding did she show herself toward Troiolo when he looked at her, but at all times over her right shoulder she gazed toward him modestly” (2.82).<sup>23</sup> Yet the purposes of these scenes differ; Boccaccio’s window scene serves to reveal to Troiolo Criseida’s approval and encouragement of his attentions, whereas Chaucer’s scene establishes Troilus’s prowess as a warrior and his modesty, the latter of which serves to endear Troilus to Criseyde.<sup>24</sup>

### III. Drawing upon the Prose *Lancelot*—Troilus as Courtly Lover

As noted earlier, many knights are unsurpassed on the battlefield for skill and in the court for beauty. Gawain, for example, is known far and wide both in England and in France for his possession of both traits. Yet Gawain is quickly replaced by Lancelot as the “flower of chivalry” due to his lack of one essential trait—he lacks the capacity to change. As Martin Gosman notes, “Gawain is a mere catalyst. Of course he, too, can fight and eliminate injustice, but he will never reach the lonely heights of a Perceval or of a Lancelot.”<sup>25</sup> Because of his inability to evolve, Gawain can never truly commit to one woman, and therefore perpetually lacks a beloved to drive him to new heights. However, Lancelot encounters Guinevere soon after his arrival to Arthur’s court, and from that moment, the seeds of love are planted, for Lancelot, unlike Gawain, is imperfect and must always strive upwards. Therefore, Lancelot does nothing without Guinevere foremost in his thoughts. When his

strength is failing, it is her face which reinvigorates him, and he seeks to serve her will in all of his actions. In this next section, I explore the ways in which Chaucer's Troilus resembles the Lancelot of the Prose *Lancelot* in terms of their love service to Criseyde and Guinevere, respectively. More specifically, both Troilus and Lancelot are neophytes to the experience of love and are affected by the sight of the beloved in a similar manner, resulting in increased bashfulness as well as prowess on the battlefield, while Boccaccio's Troilo remains largely in control of his emotions. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, until the argument between Love and Reason in the fourth book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, both characters are completely devoted to their ladies.

Boccaccio's Troilo is not a novice to love's service. Prior to Troilo's first encounter with Criseida, he expresses his gratitude that he is no longer subject to the pangs of love; he has suffered them before, and has disappointed as a result: "I have already experienced through my great folly what this accursed fire is. And if I were to say that love was not courteous to me, and did not give me delight and joy, certainly I'd be lying; but all the good together that I gathered in my desire for love was little or nothing compared to the torments and to the sad sighs" (1.23).<sup>26</sup> This is yet another way in which Chaucer's Troilus deviates from Boccaccio's Troilo and nears the character of Lancelot: both are inexperienced in love, and as a result, devote themselves exclusively to one woman their entire life. Chaucer alters his protagonist by stripping him of any experience with love. Thus we learn from Troilus himself that "I have herd told, pardieux, of youre lyvyng, / Ye lovers" (1.197-98). His

experience is gained, not through first-hand experience, but rather from what others have told him. While Criseida is only the latest (and last) of Troiolo's great loves, Criseyde is Troilus's first (and only) love. Few among the acclaimed classical and medieval lovers fall into this category; Paris courts Oenone prior to Helen, and Tristan vies with his uncle for a married woman long before either even dreams of Iseult. And as noted above, Lancelot's devotion to Guinevere is what sets him apart from the myriad of other knights in both classical and medieval literature.

When Boccaccio's Troiolo first sees Criseida in the *Filostrato*, there is no attempt to hide his interest in her beauty: "he took the highest delight in gazing fixedly among those other persons at her bright eyes and her angelic face" (1.28).<sup>27</sup> Troiolo is in control of his actions, as indicated by the Italian adjective *fiso*; his gaze is fixed as he stares intently at her, reaping pleasure in the process. As the service continues, so does Troiolo's rapt gaze: "Because this lady with the black mantle was pleasing to Troiolo beyond any other, without saying what reason kept him there so long, he gazed secretly at the object of his high desire from afar, and looked as long as the honors to Pallas lasted without disclosing anything to anyone" (1.30).<sup>28</sup> Boccaccio describes the effect that Criseida has on Troiolo: *diletto*, or "delight"; *piacendo*, or "pleasing"; and *disire*, or "desire." There is no suffering, no sense of overwhelming shock as the currents of love strike him, nor does he fear that his behavior will be noticed by his companions.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Chaucer's Troilus is bewildered by his first sight of Criseyde, and with unfamiliar waves of emotion sweeping over him, stands as if rooted to the spot:

“sodeynly he wax therwith astoned / . . . / Therwith his herte gan to sprede and rise” (1.274-78). Although his reaction is much more emotional than that of Troiolo, Troilus does attempt some decorum, for as Windeatt notes, Chaucer “stresses his T[roilus]’s concern to conceal his emotions from others in that Troilus attempts to not openly stare at Criseyde.”<sup>30</sup> Despite his best efforts, however, his eyes are constantly drawn to her: “But from afer, his manere for to holde, / On other thing his look som tyme he caste, / And eft on hire, whil that servyse laste” (1.313-15). In addition, Criseida is the fount of all beauty and virtue in Troilus’s eyes; he has never seen such beauty and asks himself, ““wher hastow woned, / That art so feyre and goodly to devise?” (1.276-77). Like Boccaccio’s Troiolo, Troilus does derive pleasure from watching Criseyde, but it is accompanied with the sharp pangs of love: “sodeynly hym thoughte he felte yen, / Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte” (1.306-07). Her presence throws him into such a trance that “Unnethes wiste he now to loke or wynke” (1.301).

Compare these behaviors of Chaucer’s Troilus to that of Lancelot. First, Lancelot, too, is entranced when he first sees Guinevere in the Prose *Lancelot*, and views the Queen as the epitome of loveliness: Lancelot “looked at [Guinevere], too, every time he could do so without being noticed. He wondered where all the beauty could come from that he saw in her” (2.65).<sup>31</sup> Like Troilus, he finds it difficult to concentrate in the presence of such magnificence: “At her touch, he started as if suddenly awakened, and he was so taken with the thought of her that he did not know what she was saying” (2.65).<sup>32</sup> Neither Troilus or Lancelot have control over

themselves when confronted with the beloved because she fills their minds and robs them, so to speak, of their willpower.

This is in sharp contrast to Boccaccio's Troiolo, for whom Boccaccio continually emphasizes his volition in his actions. For example, in the prose transition just before Troiolo leaves the temple of Pallas, Boccaccio writes that "Troilo, pleased with Criseida, decides, thinking of her, to follow his new love, giving thanks for being enamored" (35).<sup>33</sup> Although both Troiolo and Troilus are pierced by Love's arrow, only Troilus is helpless in his affliction in that Boccaccio's Troiolo makes an active choice (*dilibera*) to love Criseida.

This motif of self-control continues as Boccaccio develops his narrative, and to a certain extent, Chaucer mirrors his source material. For example, both Troiolo and Troilus return, thoughtful, to their palace with their companions, and attempt to hide their ardor with a mask of joviality. As soon as they are able, they dismiss their followers so that they may turn their full attention to thoughts of Criseida / Criseyde. Yet the motives for each character's behavior following the episode in the temple differ. Specifically, Boccaccio's Troiolo is fearful of his companions' mockery; consequently he keeps "his desire well hidden so that the outrageous things which he had said earlier about others might not be turned against him if by chance the passion into which he had fallen should become known" (1.31).<sup>34</sup> Boccaccio presents Troiolo as self-interested; that is, he seeks ultimately to serve himself, not the beloved. In fact, once the arrows of Eros have entered his eyes, we are told that Troiolo "was eager to cure his amorous wounds, and toward this end he placed every thought, and

all his suffering and his delight” (1.44).<sup>35</sup> Criseida becomes a means to an end, rather than the end itself.

Chaucer’s Troilus, on the other hand, finds himself in a whirlwind of emotion which he can barely contain in the presence of others; we are told that he is “Repentyng hym that he hadde evere ijaped / Of Loves folk” (1.318-19), and cannot keep his joyful façade for very long: “For love bigan his fetheres so to lyme / That wel unnethe until his folk he fayned / That other besy nedes hym destrayned” (1.353-55). The emotional toll of his encounter with Criseyde is much more severe than in Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*. Chaucer further highlights this emotional struggle by giving Troilus a speech to his companions. Boccaccio tells us only that “in order to hide his amorous wound better, [Troilo] mocked those who loved for a good while, and then pretending that other matters constrained him, he told each one to go where he pleased” (1.32);<sup>36</sup> however Chaucer allows us to hear Troilus’s words—and his subject matter is the agony of love—how every joy is accompanied by equal woe, and how the woman will misconstrue the man’s good intentions. Although we are told that “at hem he gan to smyle” (1.329), we cannot help but wonder at the irony of the speech—that Troilus ruefully mocks himself, aware of his lack of control over the situation and eyeing uneasily his impending sufferings. Yet while he feels the same amorous pain as Boccaccio’s Troilo, Chaucer’s Troilus seeks to serve not himself, but Criseyde: “It was to hym a right good aventure / To love swich oone, and if he dede his cure / To serven hir, yet myghte he falle in grace” (1.368-70). His focus is not on easing his own pain.

As is typical in medieval romance, any knight seeking to win his lady's approval must perform extraordinary feats. I have already discussed above the extent to which the three characters in question have exceeded the deeds of their companions. But what distinguishes a great warrior from the admirable likes of Hector, Gawain, or Yvain is, first and foremost, their devotion to their lady. Consequently, lover knights find within themselves reserves of strength unknown to those lacking love as a motivator. Boccaccio clearly knows the ennobling powers of love—in his *Filostrato*, Troiolo performs greater deeds in order to gain favor in the eyes of Criseida: “through love, if the story speaks the truth, he became so fierce and strong in arms that the Greeks feared him as they did death” (1.46).<sup>37</sup> Love literally transforms him on the battlefield. Several lines later, Boccaccio indicates that Troiolo does not fight for hatred of the Greeks nor for the relief of Troy, and Chaucer echoes this idea: “But for non hate he to the Grekes hadde, / Ne also for the rescous of the town” (1.477-78); however, the motivation for each warrior is subtly different. In *Filostrato*, “[Troiolo's] desire for glory to be more pleasing caused all this” (1.46).<sup>38</sup> Criseida is absent from his line of thought. One could infer that Troiolo seeks to be more pleasing to Criseida, but it is not explicitly stated—and as noted above, Troiolo's ultimate goal is to heal his own wounds.

On the other hand, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the hero fights to be admired by Criseyde, who is immediately present in his mind through the use of the pronoun “hire”: “But only, lo, for this conclusion: / To liken hire the bet for his renoun” (1.480-81). In addition, to further establish that Troilus is driven to greater heights of



prowess by his love for Criseyde, an episode is added in which Troilus goes into battle, newly inflamed with hope, after Pandarus informs him of the former's intent to speak to Criseyde on his behalf. There is no corresponding passage in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. Perhaps most importantly, Troilus swears an oath of loyalty to Criseyde: "myn estat roial I here resigne / Into hire hond, and with ful humble chere / Bicomme hir man" (1.432-34). When he finally finds himself admitted to Criseyde's presence, he quickly kneels before the altar of his love: "This Troilus ful soone on knees hym sette / Ful sobroly, right be hyre beddes hed" (3.953-54).<sup>39</sup> Although Boccaccio's Troiolo also prays to the God of Love, he does not offer his fealty; instead, he exclaims, "if my service pleases you [the God of Love] at all, I pray you obtain from [Criseida's eyes] the salvation of my soul, which lies prostrate beneath your feet, for the sharp arrows which you shot so wounded it when you showed me the beautiful face of this lady" (1.39).<sup>40</sup> While Chaucer's Troilus initially addresses his plea to the God of Love, ultimately it is Criseyde who has power over him, and he is content with this end. However, once again we see that Boccaccio's Troiolo seeks not Criseida but a cure for his amorous wound, and places himself not in the palm of his beloved, but rather at the feet of the Love God.

As Derek Brewer notes, Lancelot is "the most obsessive of lovers,"<sup>41</sup> and here we see yet another parallel between Troilus and Lancelot in that Troilus is equally obsessive about Criseyde. When asked by Guinevere as to the driving force behind his great deeds, Lancelot must admit that she, and no other, was foremost in his thoughts. Recalling their first meeting, Lancelot tells Guinevere:

I . . . said that I was your knight in whatever place I might be. And you said that you wanted me to be your knight and your friend. . . . Since then those words could never leave my heart; those were the words that made me a worthy knight, if I am one; never have I been so badly off that I did not remember those words; they have kept me from all evil and saved me from all dangers; those words satisfied me in all my hunger, and made me rich in my great poverty. (2.145)<sup>42</sup>

He has, in effect, made an oath to serve Guinevere, and has reaped the benefits; love is his currency and nourishment. And it is not just through words that Lancelot indicates his loyalty to Guinevere, but through his actions as well. During Arthur's war with Galehaut, Lancelot indicates his constant awareness of Guinevere's presence in that whenever he finishes fighting, he stares tenderly at the tent in which she resides: "As soon as all three lances were shattered, he came back beside the river, to the place where he had been before, and turned his face toward the brattice, with great tenderness in his gaze" (2.132).<sup>43</sup> As Elspeth Kennedy notes, Lancelot's "love for the queen has not constituted a threat to the kingdom, but has rather been a source of strength, an inspiration for success in every adventure, in contrast with the loves of other knights encountered in the romance."<sup>44</sup>

Yet what most firmly links Chaucer's Troilus to the character of Lancelot is their behavior during the first meeting with the beloved. In *Filostrato*, Criseida is more than aware of the upcoming tryst with Troilo—unlike her Chaucerian counterpart, who is lured to Pandarus's house under false pretenses, Criseida is an

active participant: “the opportunity desired by the two lovers came, and so Criseida had Pandaro called to her and explained everything to him” (3.21).<sup>45</sup> When they are alone at last, there is no hesitancy, no shyness, between the two soon-to-be lovers: “he embraced her, and they kissed each other on the mouth” (3.29).<sup>46</sup> Troilo takes the initiative in caressing her, and since the Italian *basciaronsi* is a third-person reflexive plural verb, the kiss is mutual, and the lovers are equally aggressive.

But it is not so when Lancelot’s love is finally brought to Guinevere’s attention, or when Troilus comes to Criseyde. Instead, the lover is overcome with bashfulness.<sup>47</sup> For example, when Lancelot approaches Guinevere, he “was trembling so violently that he could scarcely greet her; his face had lost all color” (2.143).<sup>48</sup> In *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Troilus is assured of Criseyde’s fidelity and yet sorrowed by the suffering Pandarus’s guile has caused her, he experiences a strong physical reaction:

. . . the sorwe so his herte shette  
 That from his eyen fil there nought a tere,  
 And every spirit his vigour in knette,  
 So they astoned or oppressed were.  
 The felyng of his sorwe, or of his fere,  
 Or of aught elles, fled was out of towne;  
 And down he fel al sodeynly a-swowne. (3.1086-92)

Just as when they first caught sight of Guinevere and Criseyde, Lancelot and Troilus are still overwhelmed by the presence of their beloved, and have no control over

themselves, either emotionally or physically. At this moment, Pandarus seizes his opportunity, and stripping Troilus of his outer garments, places Troilus in bed with Criseyde. Likewise, Lancelot nearly faints during his interview with Guinevere, and also needs must be aided by Galehaut:

He [Lancelot] was so full of anguish at this that he was near to fainting, but his fear concerning the ladies held him back. And the queen herself feared for him, seeing him change so; she grasped him by the shoulder, to keep him from falling, and called to Galehaut. The latter jumped up, ran to her, and saw that his companion was in such a sorry state that his heart was in turn filled with anguish. (2.145)<sup>49</sup>

In both texts, a third party—Galehaut in the Prose *Lancelot* and Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*—must negotiate the first meeting as well as the first kiss.<sup>50</sup> There is no physical infirmity in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, nor is Pandaro present during the lovers' first tryst.

Finally, while Boccaccio's lovers are equally ardent, in *Troilus and Criseyde* and in the Prose *Lancelot*, the beloved must take the initiative, and at the urging of the go-between. For example, after Galehaut requests that Guinevere take pity on the fainting Lancelot, "Seeing that the knight dared do no more, the queen took him by the chin and gave him a prolonged kiss in front of Galehaut" (2.146).<sup>51</sup> Criseyde too yields to Pandarus's request to "pullen out the thorn / That stiketh in his herte" (3.1104-05), and in order to recover Troilus from his unconscious state, "She ofte

hym kiste; and shortly for to seyne, / Hym to revoken she did all hire peyne” (3.1117-18).

#### IV. The Argument Between Love and Reason: Drawing Upon Chrétien’s *Charrette*

Yet a discordant note is struck before the lovers of *Troilus and Criseyde* consummate their love. While both Boccaccio’s Pandero and Chaucer’s Pandarus warn Troilus as to the necessity of keeping the affair secret, Chaucer’s text offers an additional eight stanzas that have no basis in the Italian source in which Pandarus tells Troilus that “I koude almost / A thousand olde stories the allegge / Of wommen lost through fals and foles bost” (3.296-98). With Lancelot already evoked by Chaucer’s changes to Boccaccio’s main character, we are reminded of such a woman who is nearly lost through a false boast. At the beginning of Chrétien’s *Charrette*, the earliest text dealing with the romance between Lancelot and Guinevere,<sup>52</sup> a strange knight leads Guinevere away from Arthur’s court. What enables this event is a foolish boast made by Kay—he tricks Arthur into granting him permission to fight the foreign knight, even though everyone at the court knows that Kay will lose the battle, and consequently the queen. Fortunately for the Arthurian court, Lancelot soon hears about the abduction, and sets out to rescue Guinevere from Meleagant. In this section, therefore, I turn to Chrétien’s *Charrette* in order to explore the ways in which Chaucer’s text continues to build upon his suggestion of Lancelot; specifically, while Lancelot chooses to act when he encounters an obstacle to his love, Troilus

proves himself nearer in kin to Kay, failing to keep his beloved in Troy, and consequently in his life.

In the fourth book of *Troilus and Criseyde*, we find an argument between Love and Reason. Troilus has just learned that Criseyde is to be traded to the Greeks for the Trojan Antenor, and must decide whether or not to act in order to keep his beloved with him. Those familiar with Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* might recall the extensive argument that Reason presents against serving the God of Love. This dichotomy of Love and Reason also appears in the *Filostrato*, and can be traced easily further back into antiquity. A number of studies have already shown Chaucer's debt to Boccaccio, and the passage that I examine offers a close translation of the *Filostrato*. However, this episode is also highly reminiscent of a scene in Chrétien's *Charrette*, when Lancelot must deal with these same abstract ideas; Lancelot is torn between mounting a shameful cart in order to learn of his beloved's whereabouts, and remaining respectfully on foot. Lancelot chooses love and action; Troilus claims to choose reason, but in actuality opts for passivity. Although Calin cautions against connecting Chaucer and Chrétien, noting that "it is almost certain that Chaucer, like everyone else in his century, and Malory's, received his French Arthurian education from the Prose Lancelot,"<sup>53</sup> the parallels which emerge when the *Charrette* is placed alongside this portion of Chaucer's *Troilus* are particularly distinctive. At the same time, Muscatine discusses the ways in which Chaucer learns to blend seamlessly multiple styles from authors such as Jean de Meun, who "draws on textual sources as far part as Ovid, the ascetics, and the fabliaux" for his characters of the Duenna and

the Jealous Husband in the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>54</sup> It is possible that Chaucer himself was not even aware of his blending of Arthurian narratives as he composed the argument between Love and Reason. Indeed, C.S. Lewis also has found in the *Troilus* echoes of Chrétien, describing Chaucer's work as "a new *Launcelot*" and "a return to the formula of Chrétien."<sup>55</sup> Thus I argue that through this allusion to Chrétien's work, Chaucer provides clues to guide us in judging Troilus as a courtly lover.

Much scholarship has already been devoted to reconstructing how a medieval audience may have reacted to Chaucer's hero, and as Siegfried Wenzel notes, "The whole meaning of the poem will change accordingly if one sees Troilus as either an ideal knight or a neurotic weakling, as a noble courtly lover or as Everyman painfully caught in the snares of Satan."<sup>56</sup> Regardless of whether or not Chaucer has Chrétien's conflict in mind, when we place Troilus and Lancelot side by side at the moment that they are confronted with an obstacle to their beloved, we are given a fulcrum upon which to place our scales. Furthermore, when we consider certain medieval views of Lancelot, we find that the balance is clearly in Lancelot's favor. As the ideal lover, Lancelot does not abide by the systematic rules of *fin amor*, or courtly love. Troilus, on the other hand, fares poorly through the contrast. While the main character of Chaucer's version attempts to follow the conventions of courtly love, as Muscatine notes, Troilus is "too perfect a courtly lover,"<sup>57</sup> and due to the resulting paralysis, he loses everything.

For the most part, Chaucer stays fairly close to his Italian source during the debate between Love and Reason. In both the Italian and the English, Love initially prompts Troilus to act. Boccaccio writes that “Love made him ready to oppose anything” (4.16),<sup>58</sup> which Chaucer renders as “Love hym made al prest to don hire byde” (4.162). Chrétien’s description of Love is similar: “Love, which held sway within his heart, / urged and commanded him” (372-73).<sup>59</sup> There is little difference among the content of these three quotations; in each case, Love compels the character to act in a certain way through a variety of verb choices: *facea* (from the Italian *fare*, to do or make), the English verb “made”, and the French *comande* (from *comander*, to order or command) and *semont* (from *semondre*, to encourage or urge). In addition, each text presents Love and Reason as opposed concepts. In the Italian, Reason is “on the other side” from Love (4.16);<sup>60</sup> Chaucer’s translation is nearly identical: Reason is “on that other side” (4.164). In the French version, Reason “does not follow love’s command” (365).<sup>61</sup>

Whereas Chaucer’s text offers a close translation of the verb accompanying Love, it does not do so with Reason. That is, Chaucer clearly knows that *facea*, used with Love, and *faceva*, used with Reason, are forms of the same imperfect indicative verb, yet he uses the verb “seyde” to accompany Reason: “Resoun seyde hym” (4.164). As Windeatt notes in his edition of the *Troilus*, “[r]eason’s reported reaction in [*Filostrato*] 16 becomes in [*Troilus and Criseyde*] a direct-speech projection to Troilus by Reason of Criseyde’s likely response.”<sup>62</sup> We find a similar verb choice when we turn to Chrétien’s passage: “Reason . . . / Told him” (365-66).<sup>63</sup> Like that



of Chaucer, Chrétien's version makes Reason speak with his use of the verb *dire*, to speak. Yet at the same time, each text introduces, via Reason, the idea of shame resulting from public knowledge of the protagonist's actions. For example, Chrétien writes that Reason "counseled him / Not to do or undertake anything / For which he might gather shame or reproach" (367-69),<sup>64</sup> and Boccaccio's Reason suggests that "perhaps Criseida might be angry with it because of shame" (4.16).<sup>65</sup> Finally, Chaucer's Reason fears that "Lest for thi werk she wolde be thy fo, / And seyn that thorough thy medlynge is iblowe / Youre bother love, ther it was erst unknowe" (4.166-68).

Of course, such textual changes are not enough to suggest that Chaucer had Chrétien's text sitting in front of him as he was composing *Troilus and Criseyde*. But although Derek Brewer has argued that "No firm evidence exists that Chaucer was aware of the works of the greatest writer of French romance, Chrétien de Troyes,"<sup>66</sup> the changes made between the *Filostrato* and *Troilus and Criseyde* suggest that Chaucer had incorporated the legend of Lancelot into his mental library as these departures resemble consistently both the Prose *Lancelot* (in terms of Troilus's behavior, as discussed in previous sections) and Chrétien's *Charrette*. The language and the characterization of Troilus as warrior lover are not the only ways in which Chaucer's text continues to deviate from Boccaccio's *Filostrato* in order to more closely align itself with the Lancelot narratives, particularly the *Charrette*—we also find an increased emphasis on the honor of the beloved, as well as varying reactions

on the part of the protagonists to the Trojans' decision to render up Criseida / Criseyde to the Greeks.

## V. Defending Criseyde's Honor: Troilus's Failure

As Windeatt suggests, "Troilo's brief thought of Criseyde's shame, becomes Troilus's anticipation of Criseyde's fear of public knowledge succeeding former secrecy."<sup>67</sup> When Pandaro later proposes that Troilo steal away with Criseida in the *Filostrato*, the latter responds, "I have not been able in my fervent love to turn my back on the decision the Trojans are bound to" (4.67).<sup>68</sup> He is concerned about Criseida's reputation; however, he is more interested in his duty to his country. This is not a surprise, given that there has been little discussion of Criseida's status throughout the poem. In fact, when Pandaro has referenced Criseida's chastity, it has been to assure Troilo that it will not be an obstacle to his love: "My cousin has only one quality, somewhat troublesome to you . . . she is more chaste than other ladies and has scorned the things of love more; but if nothing else vexes us, believe me I will find a way . . . to deal with this according to your need" (2.23).<sup>69</sup> He does remind Troilo, just prior to the tryst, that he has "cast my honor to the ground, for you I have corrupted the wholesome breast of my sister" (3.134).<sup>70</sup> However, in his mind, Criseida's purity has already been compromised, and public notice would be most detrimental to him: "this can never happen without great shame to me" (3.8).<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, Chaucer eliminates Troilus's sense of patriotic loyalty; it is not a factor in the equation. Only the specter of Criseyde and her reputation remains, looming over his imagination, which has been emphasized throughout the poem. As Windeatt notes, while Chaucer continues the good qualities of Boccaccio's Criseida (her joyfulness, her eloquence, her grace, for example), he augments the purity of her name while omitting "Criseida's 'greatness of spirit.'" <sup>72</sup> At the same time, Chaucer substitutes Boccaccio's description of Criseida's "mettle with added stress on her concern for honour and her goodness" when Pandarus first learns of Troilus's interest in his niece. <sup>73</sup> Later, while Criseyde debates with herself as to whether or not she should accept Troilus's love, she muses on the dangers of love becoming public: "thise wikked tonges ben so prest / To speke us harm" (2.785-86). Again, as Windeatt notes, while there are seeds of concern with public exposure in the *Filostrato*, it is a more prominent strain in *Troilus and Criseyde*. <sup>74</sup> We find a similar emphasis on reputation in the Prose *Lancelot*, for once Guinevere confirms Lancelot's identity and his love for her, she tells him, "'Now take care that this be kept secret: this is necessary, for I'm one of the ladies in the world about whom the greatest good has been said. If my reputation were to suffer because of you, it would be a base and ugly love'" (2.146). <sup>75</sup>

Thus when Troilus first hears of the exchange of Antenor for Criseyde, immediately "thoughte he thynges tweye: / First, how to save hire honour, and what weye / He myghte best th'eschaunge of hire withstonde" (4.157-59), and during the debate between Love and Reason, he fears lest "thy medlynge is iblowe" (4.167), or

made public. On the other hand, Troiolo only thinks of how to prevent the exchange, “turning over within himself what he might have to do, if his misfortune were so great that . . . Criseida should be given up to Calchas, so that he might be able to overturn the decision altogether” (4.15).<sup>76</sup> Surprisingly, Chaucer’s Troilus appears much more in control of the situation than Boccaccio’s protagonist, particularly when we remember the emotional rollercoaster to which his love for Criseyde had subjected him upon earlier. He is able to keep Criseyde’s desire for propriety forefront in his mind while Boccaccio’s Troiolo seems on the verge of making a spectacle of himself.

However, that is not what happens. Boccaccio’s Troiolo is in a state of indecision as to how he should act resulting from the debate between Love and Reason; we are told that he is “wishing and not wishing now this, now that” (4.16),<sup>77</sup> and that he “stood suspended in such a way” as the barons come to their final decision (4.17).<sup>78</sup> That is, he does not decide on a course of action; instead, he hears the court’s decision and unable to opt for a particular strategy, faints. His brothers manage to revive him from his death-like state, and he returns to his house, where he vents his sorrow. But even in the safety of his palace, Troiolo refuses to make a decision, and accounts for himself to Pandaro by echoing his earlier indecision: “I fear to tarnish her honor and her reputation with violent abduction, and I do not know for sure that she would be content with it [...] Therefore my heart has not dared to make a decision, because, on the one hand, it desires this and, on the other, it fears to displease, for I would not wish to keep her if it were displeasing to her” (4.68).<sup>79</sup>

Wenzel comments, and I concur, that there is a sharp distinction between the Troilo of the *Filostrato* and Chaucer's Troilus following the debate between Love and Reason.<sup>80</sup> Chaucer follows the general outline in that Troilus returns to his house to lament this unexpected turn of events. However, Chaucer's hero not only manages to stay on his feet; he also makes a decision immediately following the debate.

Troilus rejects the advice of Love, which urges him to extreme actions: "Love hym made al prest to don hire byde, / And rather dyen than she sholde go" (4.162-63).

Instead, he seems to choose the side of Reason, opting for a course of action that has been sanctioned by Criseyde and which will preserve her good name:

He wolde lat hem graunte what hem leste,  
 And telle his lady first what that they mente;  
 And whan that she hadde seyd hym hire entente,  
 Therafter wolde he werken also blyve,  
 Theigh al the world ayeyn it wolde stryve. (4.171-75)

He will be guided by Criseyde's decision, and will wait passively for her instructions.

Prior to the Trojans' decision to return Criseyde to her father, Criseyde has been pleased with Troilus's ability to act discretely: "For whi she fond hym so discret in al, / So secret, and of swich obëisaunce, / That wel she felte he was to hire a wal / Of stiel" (3.477-80). In fact, they seem to be so united in their love for one another that "It semed hire he wiste what she thoughte / Withouten word, so that it was no need / To bidden hym ought to doon" (3.465-67). This mutual understanding is Chaucer's addition, for there are no corresponding passages in Boccaccio's

*Filostrato*. Thus, when Chaucer's Troilus is presented with an obstacle to his love, we expect him to make a decision without needing to consult Criseyde; surely he knows enough to be able to act on her behalf. However, when he and Criseyde are reunited following the court's decision, Criseyde appeals to Troilus to act; in other words, she relies upon her "wal / Of stiel" when she cries out, "O Jove, I deye, and mercy I beseche! / Help, Troilus!" (4.1149-50). She falls into a death-like faint following this exclamation, and Troilus, fearing her demise, does the only thing he knows to do: he prepares to kill himself. It is only after Criseyde has revived and they have clasped each other tightly in bed that Criseyde realizes that her knight looks to her to devise a plan. Her "wal / Of stiel" is not so strong, after all. Consequently we have yet another, albeit more brief, debate between Love and Reason. Hearing Criseyde's plan to leave Troy, returning within ten days, Troilus's "herte mysforyaf hym evere mo" (4.1426); however, once again, Reason wins and Troilus is able to wrestle his heart into acceptance of Criseyde's plan. Boccaccio's Troilo is not quite so torn; in fact, there is no struggle with the heart: "it seemed to him almost probable that what she said with certainty was so, ought to be so. But because he loved her very much, only slowly did he put faith in it" (4.137).<sup>81</sup>

Although Troilus claims to choose Reason, what he truly chooses is inaction. He will "lat them [the lords of Troy] graunte what hem leste" (4.171), just as he will later allow Criseyde to determine his course of action. What Troilus fails to realize following the debate between Love and Reason is that at this moment he has broken his earlier oaths of loyalty to Criseyde. He has sworn to be her knight, and to keep

her from public shame—but he, along with his brother Hector, has also sworn to be her protector. When he tells Pandarus that “if I wolde it openly desturbe, / It mooste be disclaundre to hire name” (4.563-64), he is merely rationalizing his earlier failure to save Criseyde.

It is true that Troilus needs to be discrete; however, he has already made a public avowal with his brothers to serve Criseyde in a non-romantic way, and Hector has already shown him an appropriate course of action. First, when Criseyde first learns that her father has forsaken the city of Troy, she immediately fears reprisal, and turns to Hector for protection. In both Boccaccio and Chaucer’s texts, Hector’s response is the same, guaranteeing her safety and honor “As fer as I may ought enquire or here” (1.123). Later, when Pandarus approaches Deiphebus with the false story of Criseyde’s oppression, the latter also offers his protection: “trusteth wel that I / Wol be hire champioun with spore and yerde; / I roughte nought though alle hire foos it herde” (2.1426-28). Deiphebus, at Pandarus’s urging, includes Troilus in the obligation: “Deiphebus had hym preied over-nyght / To ben a frend and helping to Criseyde” (2.1549-50). These last two episodes are entirely of Chaucer’s invention; there are no corresponding passages in Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*. Thus Chaucer has added a public assurance of Troilus’s obligation to help Criseyde in any distressing matter—surely this would include the pending exchange of Criseyde for Antenor.

At least, that is what Hector believes, for when he hears of the trade, he denounces it:

‘Syres, she nys no prisonere,’ he seyde;

‘I not on yow who that this charge leyde,  
 But, on my part, ye may eftsone hem telle,  
 We used here no wommen for to selle.’ (4.179-82)

Although the people are quick to reject Hector’s judgment (“‘lat tho fantasies be!’” [4.193]), the fact remains that Hector has upheld his duty to protect Criseyde as best as he is able.<sup>82</sup> Troilus, however, sits mutely, and consequently fails in his obligation to Criseyde. Hector has just shown Troilus a way in which he can publicly fight for Criseyde without disclosing their love, but Troilus proves himself blind to such an avenue. In fact, his silence threatens their love; as brother to Hector, and co-protector of Criseyde, Troilus would be expected to join his brother in his vocal rejection of the imminent exchange. Nor is this Troilus’s only chance to assist Hector in Criseyde’s defense; as the parliament continues to debate the exchange, we are told that “Ector ‘nay’ ful ofte preyde” (4.214).

To a watchful participant, his silence during the debate actually gives away the secret of his love. After all, there are numerous times during the Prose *Lancelot* when Lancelot’s silence prompts those around him to speculate that he is in love; in fact, it is during one such moment in the Prose *Lancelot* that Guinevere first suspects that Lancelot’s awkwardness is due to her: “The queen realized right away that [Lancelot] was flustered and troubled, but she dared not think that it was because of her; and yet she did somewhat suspect so” (2.65).<sup>83</sup> In Chrétien’s *Charrette*, as Lancelot searches for signs of Guinevere, he is accompanied for a while by a maiden who quickly perceives his love for the Queen based on his behavior. Specifically,



when the two come across a comb in which Guinevere's golden hairs remain intertwined, "the pain he felt in his heart / Had driven away his speech / And the color from his face" (1435-37);<sup>84</sup> fortunately for Lancelot, the maiden reacts decorously, realizing that to acknowledge his love would only pain him more.

## VI. Evoking Lancelot: The Man of Action

In the first half of this chapter, I explored the ways in which Chaucer's Troilus resembles the character of Lancelot, and in the preceding section, I discussed Troilus's choice of "Reason" and his consequent loss of Criseyde. I turn now to Lancelot's own debate between Love and Reason in order to explore the ways in which Troilus begins to deviate from Lancelot in terms of behavior, and how the comparison of the two characters impacts our understanding of Troilus's character.

In the *Charrette*, Lancelot hastens to Guinevere's rescue upon hearing of Meleagant's abduction. A dwarf offers information concerning the queen's whereabouts provided that Lancelot ride in the cart, an action deemed shameful at the time. It is at this point that Lancelot experiences his conflict between Love and Reason, and I have already explored the similarities between this passage and those of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Like Troilus, Lancelot chooses a side; however, he chooses Love and acts immediately: "Love wished it and he jumped in— / The shame mattered not to him" (375-77).<sup>85</sup> Although Lancelot is ridiculed constantly during the next several episodes, he does not regret his actions at

any point. He is confident in his decision, whereas as soon as the day after Criseyde's departure, Troilus is questioning his decision to submit to her plan: "'I not, allas, whi lete ich hire to go" (5.226).

According to Wenzel, Reason is "an advocate of noble love: reason counsels Troilus to submit his desires to those of his lady [...] and to preserve the secrecy of their love as well as Criseyde's good reputation."<sup>86</sup> He concludes, "We can, therefore, not escape noticing the poet's emphatic pointing at Troilus as a character in whom reason rules his desires."<sup>87</sup> However, I would argue that Troilus is not to be lauded for his decision. When we examine Troilus's decision in the light of Lancelot's choice, a few things come to light. Action does not necessarily result in a soiled reputation. Lancelot chooses to follow his heart and to act, and manages to preserve the secrecy of his love. As a result, he is successful in his quest. Guinevere, too, struggles with Reason and Love, for at the conclusion of Chrétien's *Charrette*, Love advises her to leap into Lancelot's arms; however, Reason restrains her joy until "she should see and discover / A better and more private place" (6850-51).<sup>88</sup> As Owen notes, "Chrétien's own attitude appears from his other works to be that reason and restraint or *mesure* play an important part in true courtly love."<sup>89</sup> Reason is not antithetical to Love; rather, it is when the hero attempts to divorce the two that disaster results. Indeed, Chrétien offers an example of a knight who adheres too closely to the rules of courtly love, and who privileges Reason over Love: Gawain, when offered the same choice as Lancelot, rejects the cart vehemently. Thus it is no surprise that Gawain fails to find the Queen, and nearly loses his life in the process.<sup>90</sup>

Lancelot does not blindly yield to Love; he considers what will happen if he gets in the cart—he will be ridiculed—but he knows that it is not a true measure of who he is and what he is capable of. Thus his action is not unreasonable. Even though shallow bystanders constantly question Lancelot’s worth, he quickly forces them to reconsider their initial judgment of him through his subsequent actions.

“Moral Gower” himself also offers Lancelot as a paragon for emulation in his *Confessio Amantis*. Although Lancelot appears only twice in the entire text, Gower attaches great significance to his character. In the third book, which argues against the sin of sloth, we are told by Genius, Nature’s confessor, that:

Mi Sone, it is wel resonable,  
 In place which is honorable  
 If that a man his herte sette,  
 That thanne he for no Slowthe lette  
 To do what longeth to manhede.  
 For if thou wolt the bokes rede  
 Of Lancelot and othre mo,  
 Ther miht thou sen hou it was tho  
 Of armes, for thei wolde atteigne  
 To love, which withoute peine  
 Mai noght be gete of ydelnesse. (2029-39)<sup>91</sup>

Gower uses Lancelot as an example against sloth; he is a man of action, and not idleness. That is to say, Lancelot, in Gower’s eyes, is someone devoted to love as

well as to reason: “it is wel resonable” that, when a man sets his love on something honorable, he do everything in his power to attain it. And as Wenzel notes, there are a number of poems dealing with courtly love which present love and reason as equals and in harmony.<sup>92</sup>

Let us turn briefly to another work by Chaucer which more clearly articulates his views towards courtly love. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, Nature presides over her court of birds as they select their mates. However, nothing comes to pass on this particular Valentine’s Day because of the behavior of three tercel eagles. Each has come to plead for the hand of the formel, the female eagle; however, after a lengthy debate, Nature allows the formel to defer the decision for one year. The problem is that each of these eagles competes in the rhetoric of the courtly lover; that is, they use her as a mirror of their own worth, and do not seek her for herself. We find a similar problem of blindness when we examine Troilus’s first encounter with Criseyde in that he admires her prideful look and her independence—the very qualities he had just been praising in himself. Later, alone in his room, “gan he make a mirour of his mynde / In which he saugh al holly hire figure, / And that he wel koude in his herte fynde” (1.365-67). As Helterman remarks, “Troilus allows the convention [of Cupid’s power] to prevent him from loving Criseyde for herself. Instead, almost as soon as he sees her, Troilus regards Criseyde as the suitable object of every lover’s quest.”<sup>93</sup> Troilus, at this point, does not truly love Criseyde. He is the ideal courtly lover, much like Arcite in *Anelida and Arcite*, who goes through the motions of love without truly being in love. It is only when she is absent that his true love for her

blossoms and he launches into a frenetic activity similar to that of Lancelot.

Unfortunately, Troilus must suffer the consequences of his earlier decision of inaction, and Criseyde is moved beyond his reach. It is no surprise, then, that Criseyde turns to Diomedes—a man of action.

## VII. Exploring the Afterlife of Love—The Consequences of Troilus's Inaction

At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus stands mournfully at the walls of the city, searching futilely for any sign of Criseyde, or any clue as to her intentions. Ironically enough, he imagines that he sees her—approaching in a cart, of all vehicles. Yet while Chrétien's cart serves ultimately to lead Lancelot to Guinevere, this cart serves only to remind Troilus of the illusion of his love, for Pandarus quickly disabuses him of his misapprehension: “‘Al wrong, by God! What saistow, man? Where arte? / That I se yond nys but a fare-carte’” (5.1161-62). Lancelot puts himself on the cart when he chooses action, whereas Troilus seeks to put Criseyde on the cart when he chooses inaction. For Lancelot, the cart is reality, but for Troilus, the cart bearing his beloved Criseyde is empty, just as his love for her proves to be illusory. Of course, the cart returning to the city of Troy also appears in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*,<sup>94</sup> and it is unlikely that Chaucer intentionally draws a parallel between his version and that of Chrétien's at this moment; however, considering the consistent pattern of connections to the character of Lancelot, the detail of the cart is yet another reminder of Troilus's folly and paralysis. Whereas Lancelot's journey to be reunited

with Guinevere is long and arduous, he succeeds with his constant action and ability to evolve. For example, when Guinevere coolly rejects him from her presence, he must learn a sobering lesson in shame for his moment of hesitation prior to entering the cart. Once he has understood and atoned for his failure, nothing—not even iron bars—can prevent him from joining his beloved. Troilus, on the other hand, stands day after day at the gates of the city, unwilling to accept the reality of the situation and to take any action that would ensure his recovery of Criseyde.

And thus the characters move onwards towards death. At the conclusion of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Troilo finally meets Diomedes on the battlefield; however, neither is to be the end of the other. Instead, the narrator quickly informs us that “after a long stalemate, Achilles one day slew him wretchedly after he had already killed more than a thousand” (8.27).<sup>95</sup> One more stanza comments on Troilo's ill-conceived love, and the narrator ends his text with a direct address to lovers, urging them to choose women more mature than the likes of Criseida, and finally a plea for his text to win some pity from his own beloved.

Yet Chaucer turns away from the *Filostrato* at the close of his narrative. Yes, Troilus still seeks Diomedes in battle, and ultimately finds death at the hands of Achilles—but Troilus's journey does not end there. Instead, we are told that “His lighte goost ful blissfully is went / Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere” (5.1808-09), and from such heights Troilus looks down, laughing at the transient nature of the mortal world. Despite the fact that Troilus's afterlife is a pagan one

(after all, Mercury “sorted hym to dwelle” [5.1827]), the narrator urges his readers to forgo worldly vanity in order to contemplate God.

Although the Prose *Lancelot* ends with the arrival of Galahad and the onset of the Grail quest, other narratives deal with the demise of Lancelot and the fracture of the Arthurian world. For example, in *La Mort le Roi Artus*, Lancelot too loses his beloved when Guinevere, in order to atone for her sins against her husband, removes herself to a nunnery; however, while Troilus sees no value in continuing to live, flinging himself among the Greeks on the battlefield, Lancelot ultimately retires to a hermitage. There for “four years Lancelot lived a life of fasting and vigils and constant prayers and rising at dawn—a life such as no other man could have endured” (4.159).<sup>96</sup> He has successfully shifted his attention away from the mortal vanities to the higher glories of God. In fact, one manuscript of the *Mort le Roi Artus* recounts a final meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere, in which the latter urges that they devote the remainder of their lives to the Christian Church and to God (4.158).<sup>97</sup> Lancelot has learned to follow always his heart, with the occasional caution from Reason, and the rewards that he has reaped have been plenty—earthly and now spiritual. As Walters notes, “Lancelot’s renouncement of Genièvre [in *La Mort le Roi Artus*] represents a victory over himself in which his love for her becomes purified of all imperfection.”<sup>98</sup> And when he finally succumbs to death, the archbishop is granted a vision in which he finds himself ““in the company of so many angels . . . and they were taking the soul of our brother Lancelot up into heaven”” (4.159).<sup>99</sup> And as in *Troilus and Criseyde*, there is laughter—but rather than rueful laughter at

the folly of mortals, the archbishop laughs with heavenly joy in the company of angels. Lancelot has been fortunate enough to learn about the fleeting nature of human love before he dies, and consequently gains an immortal love to sustain him through all time. On the other hand, Troilus only comes to that revelation after his death.

We might think about Pandarus's perception of Reason, the stumbling block to Troilus's happiness. As Wenzel notes, Pandarus "equates reason with courtly behavior" and does not place his faith in either, encouraging Troilus to reverse his decision of passivity.<sup>100</sup> It seems that, in light of *The Parliament of Fowls* and other poems unsympathetic to the courtly love ethos, Pandarus emerges as the voice of Chaucer, criticizing those who allow their concern for external and material things to interfere in the affairs of the heart. Chaucer calls to mind one of the greatest lovers of all time when he makes his subtle modifications in his adaptation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, and by directly contrasting the rewards of Lancelot's activity with the demise resulting from Troilus's passivity, he warns us against the sloth inherent to courtly love. At the same time, through the blending of French romance elements with the Italian tragedy, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* reveals not only the extent to which the Arthurian narrative has saturated the emerging literary scene of the English; this text also showcases the Arthurian legend's fluidity as a narrative device. It may be that the court of Richard II dislikes the Matter of Britain not for its passé nature; rather, they see emerging in the French and now the English tradition, a means by which bourgeois writers, such as Chaucer, could re-evaluate and criticize the



hegemony. In the next section, therefore, I turn to *The Canterbury Tales*, which offer Chaucer's most explicit references to the Arthurian legend, which he has only hinted at in his early writings. It is in *The Canterbury Tales* that we find Arthurian creations rather than mere allusions.

<sup>1</sup> A number of similarities exist between the characters of Guinevere and Criseida as well; for example, Young comments that “Chaucer’s refining of Criseyde’s character and demeanour often causes us to forget Boccaccio’s Griseida, as soon as Pandaro has overcome her first weak defence of modesty, shows a wanton passion and a self-confidence not unlike Queen Guinevere” in *The Origin and Development of the Story of Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Company, 1908) 52. I have limited my present examination to the characters of Lancelot and Troilus.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston, 1987), cited parenthetically by book and line number in the text.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations and translations from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*, ed. Vincenzo Pernicone, trans. Robert P. apRoberts and Anna Bruni Seldis, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series A 53 (New York: Garland, 1986); cited by book and stanza number parenthetically in the text. “...ma tutta volta in su la poppa destra, / onestamente verso lui mirava...” (2.82).

<sup>4</sup> Several scholars, including Skeat, Root, and Robinson, have remarked on Chaucer’s word choice, suggesting that this is a reference to the love potion consumed by Tristan and Iseult. Karla Taylor adds that “[t]he potion that removes love from the sphere of volition sets Criseyde in the tradition of Tristan and Isolde,” focusing on the function of choice in love. Taylor also notes that Dido belongs to this group as well, via the *Roman d’Eneas* which “describes the sudden passion she conceives for Aeneas in terms of drinking a mortal drought” (13-14). See “A Text and Its Afterlife: Dante and Chaucer,” *Comparative Literature* 35.1 (Winter 1983): 1-20.

<sup>5</sup> Lori J. Walters, “Introduction,” *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook* (Routledge: New York, 1996) xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> Walters echoes this idea: “Chrétien’s *Charrete* [sic] establishes the two traits that would come to characterize Lancelot throughout history: he is an exemplary Arthurian knight and an exemplary lover” (xviii).

<sup>7</sup> All quotations of the French Prose *Lancelot* are from Alexandre Micha, ed., *Lancelot: Romance en prose du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 9 vols. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978-82), cited parenthetically by the division and section of the *Lancelot*, and then, following the semicolon, the volume and page number. The translations are from Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993-96), cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Carleton W. Carroll. “jouste si apertement que tout li autre en laissent le joster et le bien faire pour lui esgarder” (LIIa.32; 8.59).

<sup>8</sup> “mesire Gauvain tesmoigne que nus hom au sien essiant autretant n’en peust faire” (LIIa.32; 8.59).

<sup>9</sup> “Anzi ad ogni altro lui vedieno / mirabilmente nell’armi operare / color che stesser ciò forse a mirare” (1.45).

<sup>10</sup> “ché sopra i Greci uscia fuor della terra, / tanto animoso e sí forte e sí fiero, / che ciascun ne dottava” (3.90).

<sup>11</sup> “Tant s’espoenterent des merveilles que il faisoit que li pluisor tournerent le dos et s’en aloient tot droit a lor tentes moult laidement” (LIIa.46; 8.68).

<sup>12</sup> This imagery occurs in 7.80 of Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*.

<sup>13</sup> “Il resamble lion familleus qui se fiert entre les bisses, ne mie por grant feim que il ait, mais por sa grant fierté monstrier et sa vistece” (LXXIa.24; 8.469). An alternative manuscript of the *Prose Lancelot* substitutes “corrocié” for “familleus,” but the image of Lancelot as a fierce lion remains consistent in both versions.

<sup>14</sup> This occurs in LIIa.47; 8.69-70.

<sup>15</sup> “voient le cheval qui avoit plaié la teste et le col et le pis et les jambs, et li os perent en plusor liex et se gisoit devant se mingnoire a moult malvaie chiere, que il ne mengoit ne ne bevoit” (La.3; 8.32).

<sup>16</sup> “truevent le hauberk faussé et plain de grans pertruis sor les espauls et sor les bras et en maint autre lieu del cors; et ses escus estoit fendus et esquartelés et detrenchiés de cols d’espees as costés et en la pene amont jusqu’en la borcle, que petit en i avoit remés, et en che que remés i avoit, avoit pertrus de cols de lanche teus que par mains lieux i peust l’en ses puins bouter; et ses hiaumes estoit fendus et embarés et li nasiax tous detrenchiés et le cherce en pendoit contreval, que mais ne pooit avoir mestier ne lui ne a autrui” (La.4; 8.32-33).

<sup>17</sup> In fact, a number of knights often seek out Kay away from the court with the sole intent of harassing and bullying him in retaliation for his verbal taunts among society.

<sup>18</sup> “Tant en dient entre mon signeur Yvain et les autres que li vallés en est tous esbahis” (XXIIa.16; 7.271). Later, when Lancelot joins Galehaut’s company, “more was made of him than he would have wished, and he was deeply embarrassed and distressed” (2.139) (“l’en faisoit plus de lui qu’il ne volsist et moult en avoit grant aesmance et grant honte” [LIIa.76; 8.89]).

<sup>19</sup> “s’en vait entre lui et ses escuiers et s’apense qu’il veult aler cheleement en teil maniere que nus nel connoisse com chil qui bee a los et a honor conquerre” (XXIIIa.28; 7.305).

<sup>20</sup> This episode occurs when Lancelot first arrives at Arthur’s court, where he encounters a knight pierced with a sword and two spear shafts. These can be withdrawn only by a knight who has sworn to avenge his injuries, and no knight to date has dared relieve the man of his pain. Although Lancelot is yet unproven, he removes the sword and spears as soon as he is knighted; when asked as to why he did so, Lancelot replies, “I felt so sorry for him that I couldn’t bear to see him suffer anymore” (2.66) (“j’en avoie si grant pitié que plus ne pooie souffrir sa grant mesaise” [XXIIa.31; 7.279]).

<sup>21</sup> “Era d’amor tutto il suo ragionare, / o di costume, e pien di cortesia” (3.92).

<sup>22</sup> B.A. Windeatt has an explanation for this change, suggesting that Chaucer “perhaps recall[s] the wounded Hector’s entry into Troy amid acclamations” in his *Troilus & Criseyde: a new edition of The book of Troilus*, by Geoffrey Chaucer (London: Longman, 1984) 183.n.610ff. We can certainly find plausible reasons for

each of Chaucer's divergences from Boccaccio's text individually; my contention, however, is that overall, the sum of the changes between Boccaccio and Chaucer's texts evokes Lancelot's character.

<sup>23</sup> "Ella si stava ad una sua finestra, / e forse quell ch'avvenne ella aspettava, / né si mostró selvaggia né alpestra / verso di Troiol che la riguardava, / ma tutta volta in su la poppa destra, / onestamente verso lui mirava" (2.82).

<sup>24</sup> Upon seeing Troilus, Criseyde asks, "Who yaf me drynke?" (the allusion to the potion shared by Tristan and Iseult has been discussed above) and turns as red as Troilus (2.651).

<sup>25</sup> Martin Gosman, "The French Background," trans. Wynzen de Vries, in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam, VU UP, 1993) 19. Phillip C. Boardman also discusses Gawain's inability to mature in his "Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain," in *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 255-272. Perhaps the most important study to date of Gawain is Keith Busby's *Gauvain in Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980). I discuss the character of Gawain at greater lengths in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

<sup>26</sup> "Io provai già per la mia gran follia / qual fosse questo maledetto foco, / e s'io dicessi ch'amor cortesia / non mi facesse, ed allegrezza e gioco / non mi donasse, certo i' mentiria; / ma tutto il bene insieme accolto, poco / fu o niente, rispetto a' martiri / volendo avere, ed a' tristi sospiri" (1.23).

<sup>27</sup> "seco avea diletto / sommo tra uomo ed uom do mirar fiso / gli occhi lucenti e l'angelico viso" (1.28).

<sup>28</sup> "Paicendo questa sotto il nero manto / oltre ad ogni altra Troiol, senza dire che cagion quivi il tenesse cotanto, / occultamente il suo alto disire mirava di lontano, e miró tanto, / senza niente ad alcuno discoprire, / quanto duraro a Pallade gli onori" (1.30).

<sup>29</sup> When Troiolo leaves the temple and returns to his palace, he does take pains to hide his new ardor, but as I will discuss below, his reasons for doing so are different from that of Chaucer's Troilus.

<sup>30</sup> Windeatt 105.n.279-80.

<sup>31</sup> "il li, toutes les fois qu'il puet vers li mener ses iex covertement, si se merveille moult don't si grans biautés puet venire com il voit en lui paroir" (XXIIa.22; 7.274). During a later interview, Lancelot attempts to be more brazen when he prepares to leave after being knighted: "Seeing the queen, he did not hesitate but knelt before her and warmly gazed at her as long as he dared. But then embarrassment overcame him, and he suddenly lowered his eyes" (2.67) ("Et quant li vallés le vit, il ne la mesconnoit pas pas, il s'ajenoille devant li, si la regarde moult deboinairement tant com il ose. Et quant vergoigne le sorvaint, si fiche les iex vers terre tous esbahis" [XXIIa.42; 7.285]). Once again, we see the impact that Guinevere's presence has on Lancelot.

<sup>32</sup> “Et quant il le senti, si tressaut tout autresi com s’il s’esveillast, et tant pense il a li durement qu’il ne seït qu’ele li a dit” (XXIIa.23; 7.274).

<sup>33</sup> “Troïolo, piaciutagli Criseida, di lei pensando seco delibera do seguire il nuovo amore, d’assere innamorato ringraziando” (1).

<sup>34</sup> “tenendo bene il suo disio nascoso / per quel che poco avanti avea parlato: / non forse in lui ritorto l’oltraggioso / parlar fosse, se forse conosciuto / fosse l’ardor nel quale era caduto” (1.31).

<sup>35</sup> “sol di curar l’amorose ferute / sollicito era, e quivi ogni intelletto / avea posto, e l’affanno e ’l diletto” (1.44).

<sup>36</sup> “per me’ celar l’amorosa ferita, / di quei ch’amavan gran pezza gabbossi, / e poi mostrando ch’altro lo stringesse, / disse a ciascun ch’andasse ove volesse” (1.32).

<sup>37</sup> “per amor . . . / divenne in arme sì feroce e forte, / che li Greci il temien come la morte” (1.46).

<sup>38</sup> “ma voglia di Gloria / per più piacer tutto questo facae” (1.46).

<sup>39</sup> Young also notes the similarities to the Arthurian legend in this scene: “Like another Lancelot her lover kneels beside her bed, and speaks his salutation” in “Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* as Romance,” *PMLA* 53.1 (March 1938): 45. Stokes discusses the similarities between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Prose *Lancelot* when the men are accepted as lovers by the women: “In both cases, the lady demands some closer definition of the nature of the love proffered her, and in reply receives a description couched in the feudal terms of knight-service” in “The Contract of Love-Service: Lancelot and Troilus,” *Litteraria Pragencia* 9.18 (1999): 62.

<sup>40</sup> “se ’l mio server punto ti piace, / da quei ti priego impetri la salute / dell’anima, la qual prostrate giace sotto i tuoi pié, sí la ferir l’acute / saette che, allora, le gittasti, / che di costei ’l bel viso mi miostrasti” (1.39).

<sup>41</sup> Derek Brewer, “The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot: Chrétien to Malory,” in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (Routledge: New York, 1996) 8.

<sup>42</sup> “[je . . . ] vous dis que j’esoie vostre chevaliers en quelconques lieu que je fusse; et vous me desistes que vostres chevaliers et vos amis voliés vous que je fusse. . . . no onques puis del cuer ne me pot issir; et ce fu li mos qui me fera preudome, se jel sui ja; no onques puis ne fui en si grant mischief que de cest mot ne me menbrast. Chis mos me conforte en tous mes anuis, chis mos m’a de tous maus garanti et m’a getei de tous les periex, chis mos m’a saoulé en tous mes fains, chis mos m’a fait riche en toutes mes grans povertés” (LIIa.109; 8.111).

<sup>43</sup> “Et si tost com il sont pechoié tot troi, si s’en revient sor la riviere en chel lieu ou il avoit devant esté et torne son vis vers la bertesque, si regarde moult doucement” (LIIa.32; 8.59).

<sup>44</sup> Elspeth Kennedy, “The Figure of Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Graal*,” in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (Routledge: New York, 1996) 87.

<sup>45</sup> “il tempo disiato / da’ due amanti venne, donde fessi / Criseida chiamar Pandaro e mostrato / tutto gliel’ha” (3.21).

<sup>46</sup> “Poi l’abbracció e basciaronsi in bocca” (3.29).

<sup>47</sup> In addition, Boccaccio's Troiolo schemes as to how he might let Criseida know of his love, whereas both Lancelot and Troilus despair of revealing their passion. As a result, Pandaro in the *Filostrato* learns of Troiolo's love rather quickly—Troiolo is glad to make another a party to his agony. On the other hand, Chaucer expands on Troilus's confession; he makes it slower and more reluctant.

<sup>48</sup> "Et li chevaliers tramble si durement que a paines puet la roine saluer et a toute la color perdue" (LIIa.101; 8.104).

<sup>49</sup> "Et chil en fu si angoisseus que par .I. poi ne se pasme, mais la paors des dames qu'il voit reticent. Et la roine meismes le douta, qui le vit muer et cangier, si le prinst par l'espaule, que il ne caïst, et apele Galahot. Et il saut sus et vient devant li courant et il voit que ses compains est ensi conreés, si en a grant angoisse a son cuer" (LIIa.111; 8.112-13).

<sup>50</sup> In addition, both Pandarus and Galehaut have to pry Troilus and Lancelot's secrets from them. Young notes the similarities between Galehaut and Pandaro: "There can be no doubt that the Galehout of this story [the Lancelot legend] closely resembles Boccaccio's Pandaro. In Galehout we have no longer the tutor, the servant, or the mere go-between, but a courtly knight who meets Lancelot and the Queen upon a plane of social equality and genuine friendship" (51). Also, Dante calls Galehaut a pander in *The Inferno*. While I agree with Young's assessment of Pandaro's role, I would argue that Chaucer's Pandarus is even closer to the character of Galehaut—particularly since Pandarus is much more active in the affair, being coy with Criseyde, carrying letters, et cetera.

<sup>51</sup> "la roine voit que li chevaliers n'en ose plus faire, so le prent par le menton et le baise devant Galahot assés longuement" (LIIa.115; 8.115-16).

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Duggan argues that "the romances of Chrétien that had the greatest influence on subsequent literature were Lancelot [the *Charrette*] and Perceval" in *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 35.

<sup>53</sup> William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 124.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 72.

<sup>55</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) 177.

<sup>56</sup> Siegfried Wenzel, "Chaucer's Troilus of Book IV," *PMLA* 79.5 (Dec. 1964): 542.

<sup>57</sup> Muscatine 137.

<sup>58</sup> "Amore il facea pronto ad ogni cosa doversi opporre" (4.16).

<sup>59</sup> All quotations and translations from Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot, or, The Knight of the Cart (Le Chevalier de la Charrette)*, ed. and trans. William W. Kibler, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series A 1 (New York: Garland, 1981); cited by line number parenthetically in the text. "Amors est el cuer anclos / Qui li comende et semont" (372-73).

<sup>60</sup> "d'altra parte era / Ragion che 'l contrastava" (4.16).

<sup>61</sup> "Reisons, qui d'Amors se part" (365).

<sup>62</sup> Windeatt 359.n.165-68.

<sup>63</sup> “Reisons . . . / Li dit” (365-66).

<sup>64</sup> “l’anseigne / Que rien ne face ne anpreigne / Dom il ait honte ne reproche” (367-69).

<sup>65</sup> “Non forse di ciò fosse corruciosa / Criseida per vergogna” (4.16).

<sup>66</sup> Derek Brewer, “Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance,” in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974) 255-259.

<sup>67</sup> Windeatt 359.n.167-68.

<sup>68</sup> “Né m’ha però da consiglio dovuto / potuto torn el mio fervente amore” (4.67).

<sup>69</sup> “Solo una cosa alquanto a te molesta / ha mia cugina in sé oltre . . . / che ella é piú che altra donna onesta, / e piú d’amore ha le cose dispette; / ma s’altro non ci noia, credo a questa / troveró modo . . . / qual ti bisogna” (2.23).

<sup>70</sup> “gittato ho ’n terra il mio onore, / per te ho io corrotto il petto sano / di mia sorella” (3.134).

<sup>71</sup> “benché addivenir ciò non può mai / senza mia gran vergogna” (3.8).

<sup>72</sup> Windeatt 139.n.880-82; 139.n.883-89.

<sup>73</sup> Windeatt 139.n.880-82; 139.n.883-89.

<sup>74</sup> Windeatt 191.n.785-91.

<sup>75</sup> “Or gardés que la chose soit si chelee comme il est mestiers, car je sui une des dames del monde don’t on a grignors biens oïes; et se mes los empiroit par vous, ci avroit amor laide et vilaine” (LIIa.115; 8.116).

<sup>76</sup> “seco volvendo quell ch’avesse a fare, / se tanta fosse la sua isciagura / . . . / che a Calcas Criseida si rendesse, / come sturbarlo del tutto potesse” (4.15).

<sup>77</sup> “volendo e non volendo or questo or quello” (4.16).

<sup>78</sup> “Mentre che egli in cotal guisa stava / sospeso” (4.17).

<sup>79</sup> “temo di turbar con violenta / rapina, il suo onore e la sua fama, / né so ben s’ella ne fosse contenta, / . . . / per ch’a prender partition non s’attenta / il cor, che d’una parte questo brama, / e d’altra teme di non dispiacere, / ché non piacendo, non la vorre’ avere” (4.68). Interestingly enough, John Gower uses a phrase similar to Boccaccio’s “violenta / rapina” in the Latin glosses to his *Traitié Pour Essembler les Amantz Marietz*—when referring to the abduction stories of both the Lancelot and Tristan narratives, he uses the verb *violare* and indicates that only great sadness can result from such actions.

<sup>80</sup> Qtd. in Wenzel 542.

<sup>81</sup> “e quasi verisimil gli sembrava / dover ciò che diceva certamente / esser cosí, ma perché molto amava, / pur fede vi prestava lentamente” (4.137).

<sup>82</sup> Hector’s refusal to exchange Criseyde for Antenor does not occur in Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*; this section is entirely of Chaucer’s invention.

<sup>83</sup> “Maintenant aperchoit bien la roine qu’il est esbahis et trespensés, mais ele n’ose pas quidier que che soit por li et neporquant ele le soupechoune un poi, si en laise la parole ester atant” (XXIIa.23; 7.274-75).

<sup>84</sup> “il avoit au cuer tel dolor / que la parole et la color / ot une grant piece perdue” (1435-37).

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<sup>85</sup> “Amors le vialt et il i saut— / Que de la honte ne li chaut / Puis qu’ Amors le comende et vialt” (375-77).

<sup>86</sup> Wenzel 544.

<sup>87</sup> Wenzel 543.

<sup>88</sup> “. . . voie et espit / un boen leu et un plus privé” (6850-51).

<sup>89</sup> D.D.R. Owen, ed. and trans., *Arthurian Romances*, by Chrétien de Troyes (London: Dent, 1987) 511.n.369.

<sup>90</sup> In fact, it is Lancelot who plucks Gawain from the water bridge.

<sup>91</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

<sup>92</sup> Wenzel 544.

<sup>93</sup> Jeffrey Helterman, “The Masks of Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*,” *Comparative Literature* 26.1 (Winter 1974): 17.

<sup>94</sup> Windeatt indicates that the “context is pejorative” in VII.8 of Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* (509.n.1162), which incidentally still links it to the cart in Chrétien’s *Charrette*.

<sup>95</sup> “dopo lungo stallo, / avendone già morti piú di mille, / miseramente un dí l’uccise Achille” (8.27).

<sup>96</sup> Quotations of the French Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus* are from H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 8 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908-16), cited parenthetically by the volume and page number. The translations are from Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993-96), cited parenthetically by volume and page number. “si demora lancelot laiens iiij ans en tel maniere quil nestoit nus hons nes qui tant peust soffrir paine ne travail comme il souffroit de i[e]uner & de veillier” (6.388).

<sup>97</sup> The manuscript in which the episode is found is Palatinus Latinus 1967.

<sup>98</sup> Walters xxiii.

<sup>99</sup> “Iou estoie fait il en si grant [ioie & en si grant] compaignie dangeles que onques nen vi hons tant. & enporterent la sus el chiel lame de lancelot nostre frere” (6.389).

<sup>100</sup> Wenzel 544.



PART II: ARTHURIAN CREATIONS IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

## CHAPTER 3: “SIRE NONNES PREEST”—READING LANCELOT IN

*THE NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE*

In the previous chapter, I explored the connections between the character of Troilus and that of Lancelot; ultimately, Lancelot comes across as the model for emulation. Although his story contains much in the way of tragedy (such as the downfall of Camelot and Arthur’s death), his end is the ideal in that he gains admittance to a very select company—that is, Heaven. But he gets there due to his all-encompassing love for Guinevere. While his love is neither unnatural nor arbitrary as that of Tristan for Iseult, as discussed in Chapter 1, some audiences during Chaucer’s time would have viewed such love as problematic—as indeed, the Nun’s Priest in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* does. After all, Lancelot and Guinevere commit fornication and adultery respectively, both in their hearts and in deed. But these audiences miss the larger picture of Lancelot’s life by focusing only on a portion of his life, and fail to learn the lesson that a true lover such as Lancelot can offer—that steadfast devotion to ones beloved can carry one past obstacles to achieve greatness—in this life and the next. That is, although Lancelot spends most of his adult life in mortal sin, it is his love for Guinevere which leads him to confess and do penance. However, due to his narrow view of the Arthurian legend, the Nun’s Priest, like Troilus, diverges from the knight whose life he (unintentionally) parallels.

Thus through an examination of the intertextuality of the *Monk’s Tale*, *The*

*Nun's Priest's Tale*, and the description of the Prioress in the *General Prologue*, I argue in this chapter that Chaucer's text reveals the various misreadings of the Arthurian legend while showing the ways in which the legend can be used as a guide for moral behavior. That is, the Monk unconsciously incorporates elements of the Lancelot legend into his tale, the Nun's Priest focuses on the untruth of the story while using the "Book of Launcelot de Lake" as a barb against both the Prioress and the Monk, and the Prioress uses the love story between Lancelot and Guinevere as a partial model for her life. As a consequence of their incomplete readings of the Lancelot story, all three pilgrims ultimately discard the "fruyt" of the story with the "chaf." That is, the Prioress follows Guinevere's example only so far—she fails to suffer the physical deprivation and humility that Guinevere undergoes in her final days. Meanwhile, the Nun's Priest is so focused on attacking his fellow religious figures that he fails to recognize the parallels between his situation and that of Lancelot; because he is a poor reader, the Nun's Priest does not turn to God, as Lancelot does, but rather directs his attention to secular concerns.

#### I. The "book of Launcelot de Lake"—Arthurian Connections within the Tale

The name of "Launcelot" occurs explicitly twice in all of Geoffrey Chaucer's writings, and both happen within the *Canterbury Tales*. The first example appears in *The Squire's Tale*, where we are told that Lancelot "koude telle yow the forme of daunces / So unkouthe, and swiche fresshe contenaunces, / Swich subtil lookyng and

dissymulynges / For drede of jalouse mennes aperceyvynges” (5.283-86).<sup>1</sup> A brief mention of “the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That wommen holde in ful greet reverence” is offered in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (7.3212-3213). At first glance, these two fragments tell us little other than that Chaucer was aware that a book devoted to this particular knight existed, and that Lancelot was viewed as an expert on the niceties of courtly life. Yet of all the stories with which the Nun’s Priest could compare his fable, why does he choose the Arthurian legend? By exploring the connections between the Nun’s Priest’s tale and the various texts centered on Lancelot, in this first section, I argue that the Nun’s Priest as a narrator has very little familiarity with the story of Lancelot, as shown by his confused rendering of Arthurian material, and he condemns the little that he does know.

First, I would like to consider the manner in which the Nun’s Priest references Lancelot. As Archibald notes, “this passage [in the *Nun’s Priest Tale*] indicates that the story of Lancelot circulated quite widely.”<sup>2</sup> Only the name is given, which suggests that the Nun’s Priest, as a storyteller, knows that his audience would recognize the reference and would be able to fill in the back story. Indeed, Alison Stone’s survey of fourteenth-century English wills reveals that the Prose *Tristan* and the Prose *Lancelot* were among two of the most commonly inherited manuscripts,<sup>3</sup> and Calin notes that “Of all foreign romances, the Prose *Lancelot* had the most decisive impact on the evolution of romance in English,” signaling the story’s popularity among Middle English authors.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in *The Canterbury Tales*, the Nun’s Priest refers to the “book” rather than just the story. As Edward Donald

Kennedy notes, the “livre de Lancelot du Lac” was the title of many manuscripts of the French prose *Lancelot*,<sup>5</sup> as is evidenced by Machaut’s *Le Livre dou Voir Dit*, which references a book called simply “lancelot.”

But it is also possible that the Nun’s Priest refers to other accounts of Arthur’s greatest knight. In addition to the Prose *Lancelot*, there are two other major sources for information about Lancelot: Chrétien’s *Charrette*, and Dante Alighieri’s early fourteenth-century *Divina Commedia*—specifically the Paolo and Francesca episode in the *Inferno*. For example, D.S. Brewer suggests that the beginning of Chrétien’s *Charrette* provides Chaucer with the connection between femininity and the Arthurian legend; as he notes, the *Charrete* opens with an explanation that the “matiere et san” of the story are supposedly supplied by Marie de Champagne.<sup>6</sup> But while Brewer views the Nun’s Priest’s Arthurian reference as evidence for Chaucer’s dismissal and mockery of King Arthur’s world and its chivalric values, I argue that Chaucer the narrator does not speak with the same voice as the Nun’s Priest, and does not necessarily share the same narrow view of the Arthurian legend as the latter does. I agree with Brewer that the Nun’s Priest is dismissive of Lancelot, but the Arthurian influence unknowingly pervades his life and that of his fellow pilgrims, as this and the next three chapters will explore.

## II. Connecting Chauntecleer with the Arthurian Legend—The Regal Chickens

A number of connections between the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the Lancelot legend emerge when the various renditions of Lancelot's life are placed next to the story of Chauntecleer. When the *Nun's Priest's Tale* begins, we are introduced to the protagonist and his wife in terms that suggest the majesty of the Arthurian world—specifically, their physical beauty and courtliness, and their subsequent reactions to Chauntecleer's dream.

Like King Arthur at the heights of his power, Chauntecleer is presented as the most attractive male in the realm, and reigns over his “kingdom” with benign authority. That is, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur is “þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes” (53).<sup>7</sup> Chauntecleer, too, is without equal in his appearance; according to the Nun's Priest:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,  
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;  
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;  
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon  
 His nayles whiter than the lylle flour,  
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour. (7.2859-64)

Furthermore, he is kingly in his demeanor, for he struts about the farmyard “Thus roial, as a prince is in his halle” (7.3184). But just as Arthur is not known only for his beauty, neither is Chauntecleer; both also perform their kingly duties *par excellence*. As the Lady of the Lake notes in the Prose *Lancelot*, Arthur is “the worthiest man in the world” (2.61),<sup>8</sup> for as Adragain the Dark notes, when he comes to rebuke Arthur

for his failure to help Lancelot's family, Arthur is "the [king] who best maintains the honor of knighthood, and [who has] done more good, both spiritual and worldly, than any king we have heard of heretofore" (2.24).<sup>9</sup> Chauntecleer's primary duty, as a rooster, is crowing—which he does to great effect, for "In al the land, of crowing nas his peer" for his voice "was murier than the murie organ" (7.2850-51). In fact, Chauntecleer observes the heavenly movements so closely that "Wel sikerer was his crowing in his logge / Than is a klokke or an abbey orlogge" (7.2853-54).

Thus after meeting such a kingly rooster, it is no surprise that Pertelote's description is evocative of Guinevere (or at the very least, any courtly lady out of medieval romance). In *Lestoire de Merlin*, for example, Guinevere is "endowed with even greater goodness, generosity, courtesy, sense, worthiness, sweetness, and nobility" (1.253),<sup>10</sup> and in the Prose *Lancelot*, she is "the sovereign of all women and the very font of beauty" (2.65).<sup>11</sup> Pertelote, too, is the fairest among the hens, and "Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire, / And compaignable" (7.2871-72). Her position in the chicken coop also signals her prominence, for like Guinevere, Pertelote sits next to Chauntecleer. But perhaps most important is her place in Chauntecleer's heart. Even following the revelation of Guinevere's disloyalty with Lancelot in the Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus*, Arthur joyfully receives her following the Pope's intervention, for "he loved the queen so dearly that he was easily persuaded, even though he was convinced that she had been unfaithful to him" (4.131).<sup>12</sup> Guinevere is Arthur's world, just as Pertelote is Chauntecleer's, for

“trewely she hath the herte in hold / Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith” (7.2874-75).

Of course, not every creature described as beautiful and courtly need be reminiscent of Arthur and Guinevere—but there are other similarities to the overall Arthurian legend—specifically, the dream. Kennedy observes that Chaucer has the Nun’s Priest alter (either consciously or unconsciously) Pertelote’s role from the original *Roman de Renart* story. That is, Pertelote’s advice to Chauntecleer (that is, to ignore the dream) differs from what is given in the source, where Pinte (the French equivalent of Pertelote) cautions Chauntecleer about the fox, but the latter chooses to ignore her advice. As Kennedy notes, this change evokes Guinevere’s advice to Arthur in the Prose *Lancelot*, when Arthur has a series of disturbing dreams.<sup>13</sup> When he consults his chaplain, he is told that ““Dreams don’t mean a thing,”” and Guinevere answers in a similar fashion (2.108).<sup>14</sup> Pertelote’s advice to Chauntecleer echoes Guinevere’s response: ““Dredeth no dreem”” (7.2969). Therefore, in Chaucer’s narrative and in the Prose *Lancelot*, we find a dream presaging danger, which is summarily dismissed by the wife. Although Kennedy notes that another similarity exists between Arthur and Chauntecleer—that is, neither accept the woman’s verdict on the power of dreams<sup>15</sup>—ultimately Chauntecleer, distracted from his dream by Pertelote’s sexuality, overlooks the looming danger, whereas Arthur presses on to find the meaning and ways to avoid his downfall.

And here we have the first instance of the Nun’s Priest’s confused or incomplete knowledge of the Arthurian legend. When Arthur first learns of the

meaning of his dream (that he can be saved only by the Lion in Water and the Doctor without Medicine), he is troubled and perplexed; it is not until his war with Galehaut begins that the full meaning is expounded to him by a wise man, who explains that the Lion is God and the Doctor is Jesus Christ. Arthur subsequently changes his behavior and gains his salvation. Like Arthur, Chauntecleer clearly understands the power of dreams to foretell the future, and relates several stories which prove his conclusion. But rather than remaining on his guard, Chauntecleer feels “a-nyght your softe side” and banishes rationality in favor of sexual lust to “[fether] Pertelote twenty tyme” (7.3167; 7.3177). Had he fuller knowledge of the Arthurian legend, the Nun’s Priest could have seized on the parallel with Arthur’s dream to enlighten his fellow pilgrims on the necessity of confession and living a virtuous life. Instead, he conflates the character of Arthur with Lancelot.

### III. The Nun’s Priest’s Attitude Towards the Arthurian Legend

Pertelote’s place in Chauntecleer’s heart and her ability to distract him from the ominous warning of his dream highlight yet another connection between the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and the Prose *Lancelot*; that is, the idea that woman is man’s bliss and he cannot live without her. Kennedy sees Chauntecleer as parallel to Lancelot in that both are equally devoted to their beloved, and she proves to be his downfall.<sup>16</sup> In other words, man cannot fully achieve his goals because of his love for the woman. Numerous times throughout the Prose *Lancelot*, the main character is paralyzed by



the thought (or sight) of Guinevere and is captured or led astray as a result. And in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, Lancelot fails the Grail Quest due to his sin with Guinevere. Likewise, Chauntecleer's guard is lowered so that he is not initially aware of the fox's entrance into the farmyard, and later is seduced by the fox's flattery. Remember that the Nun's Priest's reference to the "book of Launcelot de Lake" occurs just before the entrance of the fox into the tale. Chauntecleer's pending folly is clearly linked in the narrator's mind with the single-mindedness of Lancelot's love for Guinevere.

But I would like to add one more Arthurian link. The Nun's Priest expounds briefly upon traitors as he prepares his audience for the appearance of the fox, and since this section follows his mention of Lancelot, we might be tempted, as Kennedy does, to think of Lancelot as a traitor. After all, what connection is there between the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the theme of betrayal? It seems that the Nun's Priest has seized an opportunity to tend to his flock, as it were, and embed a moral lesson into his fable. However, I would make two observations. First, Lancelot's loyalty is first and foremost to Guinevere; it is she, after all, who makes Lancelot a knight by girding on his sword in the Prose *Lancelot*, and during the episode of the False Guinevere, Lancelot breaks with Arthur so that he may uphold his promise to champion Guinevere, which precedes any oaths of loyalty to Arthur. Second, one of the traitors mentioned in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is Ganelon, step-father to Roland, which to my mind, brings up the relationship between Arthur and Mordred. In the previous lines, Chaucer describes the fox as lying in wait "to mordre men, / O false

mordrour, lutkyng in thy den!” (7.3225-26). Although the allusion is epic in nature, the repetition and spelling of “mordre” and “mordrour” evokes the name of Arthur’s most deadly and traitorous knight,<sup>17</sup> who like the fox, lingers in the shadows and strikes when the prey’s defenses have been lowered. Therefore, I argue that the mixing of these Arthurian connections suggests a confused knowledge of King Arthur’s world on the part of the Nun’s Priest.

These links between the Nun’s Priest’s tale and the legend of Lancelot help us to determine the story-teller’s attitude toward the Arthurian material. As stated above, the Nun’s Priest conflates Arthur and Lancelot in his description of Chauntecleer, and the fox can be interpreted as either Lancelot or Mordred, which suggests his reading of the legend is very simplistic. Several scholars, including Kennedy, interpret the brevity of his reference to indicate dislike of the Arthurian material;<sup>18</sup> after all, if the Nun’s Priest enjoys the material, surely he would have found a way to incorporate more of it into his fable. Even though King Arthur himself is used occasionally as an example of vanity in religious writings, as Dean notes, overall “Arthur seems to have little value to religious authors as a source of illustrative material,”<sup>19</sup> and the Nun’s Priest seems to be following this trend, for he says that the story which he is presently telling is “also trewe” as his fable of a cock. I agree that the Nun’s Priest’s attitude toward the legend is negative, and I would posit that his reaction is largely due to an erroneous belief that the “book of Launcelot de Lake” offers nothing in the way of moral instruction, and may actually be hazardous to the soul.

Consider the way in which the Nun's Priest introduces his Arthurian reference; specifically, he uses the word "book" rather than "story" or "tale," both of which he uses to describe the narrative that he relates to his fellow pilgrims.<sup>20</sup> These latter two words, "tale" and "story," suggest, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, an oral or written account "of an event or a series of events purporting to be true, a personal narrative,"<sup>21</sup> which may be either from history or a falsehood. In other words, an audience would expect the focus of a "tale" or a "story" to be entertainment. A "book," on the other hand, might have more authority, for one definition of this word indicates that it is "a fundamental or authoritative source of knowledge or instruction" or "a model (good or bad) of conduct."<sup>22</sup> After all, Chauntecleer, in refuting Pertelote's dismissal of dreams, comments that "men may in olde bookes rede / Of many a man moore of auctorite / Than evere Caton was" (7.2974-76). Long before he makes his comment about the "book of Launcelot," the Nun's Priest has already established the primary authority of books in his audience's mind.

In addition, the Nun's Priest says that his story of Chauntecleer is "also trewe;" while the more established meaning for this word is "authentic" or "genuine", this adjective can also indicate "Steadfast in devotion to God."<sup>23</sup> Finally, the "book of Launcelot de Lake" is held "in ful greet reverence" (7.3213)—and here we have yet another word with a religious connotation. "Reverence" can indicate respect or courtesy toward someone, but in light of the other religious connotations preceding it (and the fact that the story-teller is a member of the religious estate), another

definition is entirely appropriate: “religious veneration for God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, spiritual matters, things sacred.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Nun’s Priest prefers reading material that offers spiritual fruit.

However, the Nun’s Priest modifies his comment on “the book of Launcelot” with the observation that it is one which “wommen holde in ful greet reverence” (7.3213). The potentially neutral reference now becomes laden with ironic undertones, for the story of Lancelot is, in the Nun’s Priest’s eyes, matter fit only for women. Although Derek Brewer feels that this statement is only “a bit of gentle male chauvinism about women’s credulity,”<sup>25</sup> I would argue that the Nun’s Priest’s words are more pointed, particularly when we consider the potential danger of the Matter of Britain. By referring to the “book,” the Nun’s Priest’s reference recalls Dante’s *Inferno*, specifically Canto 5, where a book containing the adventures of Lancelot “was a Gallahault, the author as well” in that it leads Francesca and Paolo to be trapped eternally in the circles of Hell (1.57).<sup>26</sup> Just prior to the Nun’s Priest’s reference, he comments that “the latter ende of joye is wo” (7.3205). This pairing of joy and sadness is echoed in the *Inferno* when Francesca is asked to recount her story; she comments that “There is no greater woe / than looking back on happiness in days of misery” (1.55).<sup>27</sup> Yet at the same time, I would argue that the Nun’s Priest, if he were aware of the connection to the *Inferno*, would have expanded upon the dangers of secular romance; instead, he returns to the fox, and his litany of traitors. As noted above, the Nun’s Priest’s knowledge of the Arthurian legend is limited; instead, it seems more likely that his view of the “book of Launcelot” is condescending,

particularly when we consider the company which the Nun's Priest keeps—specifically, the Prioress.

#### IV. Arthurian Readers, Arthurian Actors

The Nun's Priest has a low opinion of women, and most likely takes to heart the motto "Mulier est hominis confusio" (7.3164). While he attempts to hide (or at least allay) his misogyny by claiming that "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne" (7.3265), he modifies his statement slightly, adding "I kan noon harm of no woman divyne" (7.3266).<sup>28</sup> In other words, women who are virtuous need not take insult at the Nun's Priest's tale—they are not included in its condemnation of women. However, does he know any truly "divyne" women? Many would argue no, particularly when we consider the portrait of the Prioress in the *General Prologue*. Thus the Nun's Priest, by this barbed jab at the reading habits and credulity of women, attempts to assert his intellectual superiority over the Prioress. Indeed, Richard Neuse, among others, has argued that "the *Nun's Priest's Tale* itself, though it appears to be 'above the battle,' *could* easily be viewed as the Priest's attempt to settle various (unspecified) scores with the Prioress."<sup>29</sup>

But why would the Nun's Priest be hostile toward the Prioress? Whereas many of the other pilgrims have a lengthy portrait in the *General Prologue*, we learn nothing of the Nun's Priest, aside from the fact that he is in the Prioress's retinue. The Host's words prior to the beginning of the Nun's Priest's tale do provide some

details; for example, we learn that the priest “ryde[s] upon a jade” that is “bothe foul and lene” (7.2812-13). Furthermore, the Host addresses him “with rude speche and boold” (7.2808), and refers to him as “sir John,” which Susan H. Cavanaugh notes is a “rather contemptuous designation for a priest.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas both the Prioress and the Monk are richly attired (as is expected for their rank), well-horsed, and addressed with respect (the Host refers to the Prioress as “My lady Prioress, by youre leve” [7.447] and the Monk as “My lord, the Monk” [7.1924]), the Nun’s Priest is looked down upon. As Broes notes, the condition of the Nun’s Priest’s horse indicates his lack of success in life; that “despite his position of responsibility as a spiritual counselor and confessor to the Prioress and the nuns of her convent, [he] has not fared as well as the Monk or his other fellow clerics on the pilgrimage.”<sup>31</sup> Considering his misogynistic comments regarding women scattered throughout his tale, the Nun’s Priest surely bristles with resentment as he watches others succeed in life while he remains seated upon a worn out nag.<sup>32</sup>

## V. The Prioress and Guinevere

While the Prioress’s tale is in itself an appropriate one for a religious figure to relate, when we consider her portrait in the *General Prologue* and her demeanor, she emerges as a superficial figure, one more concerned with the secular than the religious. In fact, Broes connects Pertelote with the Prioress in that both characters occupy a position of prominence over other women. Pertelote is the highest female in

Chauntecleer's heart and in the hall, and the Prioress has another nun serving as her secretary. In addition, both display similar demeanors in that each is pleasant, cheerful, and courtly.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the Prioress is reduced to a clucking hen, one who misleads others, out of ignorance, but fortunately for Chauntecleer, is not the final authority. Yet there is another aspect of the Prioress to be considered, for as discussed earlier, Pertelote evokes Guinevere; if Pertelote also suggests the Prioress, then we have a chain linking Guinevere with the Prioress. And if we take the comment made by the Nun's Priest about "the book of Launcelot de Lake" to be a jab at the Prioress, we can also infer that she is the type to devour Arthurian texts. She has with her another nun—her "chapeleyne," a nun who functions as a secretary, a keeper of secrets, to the Prioress.<sup>34</sup> In the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, when Guinevere enters the convent, she does not enter alone: "She had with her a maiden of high station who had taken the habit for love of her" (5.307-08).<sup>35</sup> In other words, the Prioress fancies herself to be Guinevere reborn; she has the accouterments of the upper class, the devoted companion, and a token of love; more importantly, she has a position of power within a nunnery. But the idea of Guinevere has been evoked long before the Nun's Priest begins his tale.

Richard J. Schoeck notes that the Prioress, with her small red mouth and her well-formed nose, emerges from the pages of medieval romance.<sup>36</sup> The typical heroine of such literary works also tends to have sparkling eyes; the Prioress's eyes are no different: "hir eyen greye as glas" (1.152). As Derek Brewer notes, grey eyes occur frequently in the traditional catalogue of feminine beauty.<sup>37</sup> For example, in *Sir*

*Gawain and the Green Knight*, Guinevere's eyes are described in a similar fashion: "Þe comlokest to discrye / Þer glent with y3en gray" (81-82). There are four other instances of grey eyes in Chaucer's writings. In the *Romaunt of the Rose*, for example, the female gatekeeper of the garden has "yen grey as is a faucoun" (546), and Dame Gladness's eyes are "greye and glad also" (862); her companion, Sir Mirth, shares this trait of feminine beauty with his "yen greye" (822). Although modern readers often think of eye color in terms of blue, brown, or hazel, to Chaucer's medieval audience, "greye" eyes are not necessarily a particular color, but rather "bright, shining, glinting; gleaming in a grayish or bluish color" and can be of "a color other than gray: red, yellow, brown."<sup>38</sup> Thus the modifying phrase "as glas" helps to indicate the brightness of the Prioress's eyes. The daughter in *The Reeve's Tale* also shares this feature: "eyen greye as glas" (1.3974); however, she is thick, with a pug nose; it is likely that the Reeve is satirizing the romance tradition in his tale.<sup>39</sup> Thus the Prioress has at least one physical trait in common with Arthur's queen.

Due to the frequency of grey eyes in medieval romance, however, I cannot conclude that the Prioress identifies with Guinevere strictly from this one physical attribute. Yet Guinevere is set apart from other medieval women in two significant ways, and Chaucer's description of the Prioress echoes many of Guinevere's defining characteristics. First, of course, is her great beauty, and as discussed above, the Prioress's portrait in the *General Prologue* suggests that she too is quite comely; Thomas J. Farrell also notes that the physical description of her found in the *General*



*Prologue* is “obviously modeled on the traditional courtly blazon.”<sup>40</sup> But Guinevere also has a courteous personality; in *Lestoire de Merlin*, as mentioned earlier, her beauty is nothing compared to her goodness, courtesy, and nobility. Perhaps more importantly, she possesses great eloquence: “for of all the ladies in the world, she was the best trained in eloquence and speech” (1.287).<sup>41</sup> A significant portion of the Prioress’s portrait is devoted to these very traits; for example, “hir smylyng was ful simple and coy” (1.119), indicating her sweet nature. She takes great pains in her singing and in her speech: “Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne, / Entuned in hir nose ful semely; / And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly” (1.122-25). Of course, Chaucer pokes fun at her French, but nonetheless the Prioress attempts to mirror Guinevere, or any medieval romance heroine, through her linguistic attempts, and as Daniel F. Pigg notes, the Prioress “has considerable skill in creating a story” when she later delivers her tale of Hugh of Lincoln.<sup>42</sup> We also learn of her goodness, for “She was so charitable and so pitous / She wolde wepe” upon seeing a dead mouse or an abused dog (1.143-44). And her manners, ever so vital to the concept of courtesy, are impeccable: “Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe / That no drope ne fille upon hire brest, / In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest” (1.130-32). In everything she does, the Prioress attempts to cultivate a regal presence, for she “peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere, / And to ben holden digne of reverence” (1.139-41).

Even her trappings potentially detract from the religious life of abstinence one would expect her to lead. Much scholarship has focused on the Prioress’s attire,

attempting to determine the extent of her worldliness, and as Muscatine notes, “Within the portraits of the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar there is tension, in various degrees, between the sacred office and the person.”<sup>43</sup> Although Eileen Power comments on the Prioress’s exposed forehead, noting that “nuns were supposed to wear their veils pinned down tightly to their eyebrows, so that their foreheads were completely hidden,”<sup>44</sup> Laura F. Hodges refutes this claim, noting that the historical evidence which Power draws upon dates from approximately fifty years after the composition of *The Canterbury Tales*. Furthermore, Hodges adds that Chaucer’s comment on the span of the Prioress’s forehead does not indicate that the forehead itself is visible, for his language indicates speculation rather than observed fact: “But *sikerly* she hadde a fair forheed; / It was almoost a spanne brood, I *trowe*” [my emphasis] (1.154-55).<sup>45</sup>

However, there are two additional items to consider: the Prioress’s name and her brooch. We are told in the *General Prologue* that she is “cleped madame Eglentyne” (1.121). Because so few of the Canterbury pilgrims are named, this detail demands our attention. As the *MED* indicates, an “eglentin” is a briar rose, and Florence H. Ridley notes, in the Explanatory Notes to the *General Prologue*, although there are historical nuns with similar names, “it probably connotes heroines in romance.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, the Prioress has a “brooch of gold ful sheene, / On which ther was first write a crowned A, / And after *Amor vincit omnia*” (160-62). The Latin text could indicate a spiritual love, and Hodges offers many examples of historical brooches and statues which depict this motto in clearly religious contexts, building on

the previous work of Sister Madeleva.<sup>47</sup> Yet at the same time, the phrase first appears in Eclogue X of Virgil's *Eclogues* with a romantic context.<sup>48</sup> We also find that in Fragment A of Chaucer's *Romaunt of the Rose* the figure of Largesse possesses a gold brooch (1193), which she makes a present of to a neighboring lady, and at the end of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, Courtesy cites this very motto to Bel Accueil in order to persuade him to yield the rose to the lover. In all, the Prioress's manner of dress, speech, and behavior discourages a spiritual interpretation, for they echo the Duenna's advice to Bel Accueil about the game of love in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*; the secular nature of this story further suggests the Prioress's lack of spiritual depth. Even if the Prioress herself does not intend for her name and person to evoke such associations, nonetheless, she cannot control how others, including Chaucer the pilgrim (who has an appreciative eye for her beauty) and particularly the Nun's Priest, read her appearance and behavior.

Ultimately, the Prioress's presentation of herself suggests that she is a superficial reader of the Arthurian legend for she does not follow Guinevere's story to the end. We are told in the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu* that the move from the secular world to that of the religious order took its toll on Guinevere: "Thus it happened that when she had to suffer the deprivations of the religious life, to which she was not accustomed, she fell at once into poor health and weakness, so that all who saw her wondered whether she would live or die" (5.307).<sup>49</sup> Despite her previous position in life, Guinevere yields to the regulations of her new environment—to her detriment (indeed, to her death). She does not abuse her power, but becomes humble instead.

The Prioress, on the other hand, takes full advantage of her position, as evidenced by her ample girth: “she was nat undergrowe” (1.156).

Therefore, the Nun’s Priest’s brief comment about the gendered readership of the Arthurian legend, in conjunction with the connections between the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and the story of Lancelot helps to reveal the extent of his knowledge of the Arthurian legend. He is aware that such books exist; plausibly he has seen them in the hands of the Prioress and other women. Although they are technically “books,” he does not view them as historically true, and he does not value them as effective teaching tools—they have value purely as secular entertainment, and in his line of work—and that of the Prioress—they are inappropriate. Furthermore, as an attendant of the Prioress, the Nun’s Priest has had a chance to observe firsthand what it means to be an “Arthurian lady;” while the Prioress weeps piteously for little animals, it is likely that she would have equal compassion for her fellow humans. Thus his remark that women (that is, the Prioress) holds these stories “in ful greet reverence” rather than directing their attention to more appropriate, spiritual matters indicates his disapproval. Yet at the same time, he reveals himself indirectly to be a consumer of these texts—that is, he knows enough of the story to be able to alter his own fable of the cock and fox to mirror the Prose *Lancelot*. He recognizes that the legend can be a useful tool to deride others—and I would also argue that he knows enough about the legend to pick up on others’ indirect references to the story of Lancelot.

## VI. The Nun’s Priest’s Attack Against the Monk

Steven Botterill accounts for some of Chaucer's changes to Dante's story of Ugolino in *The Monk's Tale*, which immediately precedes the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.<sup>50</sup> That is, Botterill notes that the introduced variations suggest Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* in that like Lancelot, Hugelyn is imprisoned in a sealed tower and cries out against Fortune. Furthermore, whereas Dante does not hide Ugolino's lack of innocence, Chaucer's Monk tells us that Hugelyn was imprisoned falsely; that "Roger, which that bisshop was of Pize, / Hadde on hym maad a fals suggestioun" (7.2416-17). Likewise, Meleageant has enclosed Lancelot within the tower unfairly. While Botterill is not arguing for a new source for the *Monk's Tale*, I argue that these changes are significant. The Monk, prior to his tale, describes his vast library of tragedy, or "to seyn a certeyn storie / [. . .] / Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee / And is yfallen out of heigh degree / Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly" (7.1973-77); clearly the "Book of Launcelot de Lake" is not to be found among such as these. What I would argue, therefore, is that the Monk has incorporated unconsciously the story of Lancelot into his tragedy.

Remember what we are told of him in the General Prologue: he is "An outridere, that lovede venerie" (1.166) and "he hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn; / A love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was" (1.196-97). This pastime and this pin, much like the Prioress's golden brooch, link the Monk with the romance tradition. Let us compare, briefly, the Monk's pastime with that of Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; when Bertilak and his retainers return from the hunt,

they spend their evenings in games—perhaps such pastimes would include performers reciting from the popular French romances. Thus it is likely that the Monk, after a long day of hunting, has heard of the legend of Lancelot and his imprisonment in the tower, and has unconsciously worked the material into his retelling of the fate of Dante’s Ugolino.

In other words, by the time that the Nun’s Priest embarks on his tale, Lancelot is in the air. Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr., has already commented on the textual links between the *Monk’s Tale* and that of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, with a focus on genre, particularly the idea of tragedy.<sup>51</sup> I would argue that thematically, through this slip of the tongue, the Monk has provided the Nun’s Priest with a double-edged sword. The Nun’s Priest comments following his Lancelot reference that it is this very text that “wommen holde in ful greet reverence” (7.4403). Through their examination of a number of other textual echoes, a number of scholars, including Lumiansky, have remarked on the hostility of the Nun’s Priest towards the Monk. The Nun’s Priest has listened carefully to the Monk’s litany of tragedies—after all, he is probably equally well-versed in them—and when the Monk deviates from the traditional story of Ugolino, the Nun’s Priest has yet another barb to sling in the Monk’s direction. That is, the Nun’s Priest picks up on the embedded Lancelot motif, and responds to it—by dismissing the subject matter as only fitting for women. Thus he attempts to figuratively castrate the Monk by placing him, along with the Prioress, among the female audience of the Lancelot story.

## VII. Gendered Arthurian Audiences

But this raises another question—how valid is the Nun’s Priest’s comment that only women values the Arthurian legend in the late fourteenth century? Despite the English court’s hostility to Arthurian romance as discussed in previous chapters, Lancelot manages to emerge onto the occasional page in a more flattering light. As discussed in Chapter 1, Chaucer’s French predecessors make frequent use of the Arthurian legend throughout their *dits*. In fact, Machaut references a book called “lancelot” in *Le Livre dou Voir Dit*; the lady writes to her lover that “by my faith, if you wrote letters as long as the *Romance of the Rose* or *Lancelot*, it would not annoy me at all to read them” (L7; 102);<sup>52</sup> the potentially tedious length suggests that the text in mind is indeed the Prose *Lancelot*. Of course, here we have a female reader indicating her awareness of the text (and implying her enjoyment of it), but ultimately the author is male.

We also find a male author acknowledging his exposure to the Arthurian legend in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. As noted in the previous chapter, “Moral Gower” offers Lancelot as a paragon for emulation. Although Lancelot appears only twice in the entire text, Gower attaches great significance to his character. In the third book, which argues against the sin of sloth, we are told by Genius, Nature’s confessor, that:

For if thou wolt the bokes rede  
Of Lancelot and othre mo,

Ther miht thou sen hou it was tho  
 Of armes, for thei wolde atteigne  
 To love, which withoute peine  
 Mai noght be gete of ydelnesse. (2034-39)<sup>53</sup>

Once more, Lancelot is connected specifically with “bokes” rather than “tales” or “stories,” which is appropriate considering that Gower uses Lancelot as an example against sloth: he is a man of action, and not idleness. That is to say, Lancelot, in Gower’s eyes, is someone devoted to love as well as to reason: “it is wel resonable” that, when a man sets his love on something honorable, he do everything in his power to attain it (2029). Within this reference, we find a number of readers; Genius, who encourages the second reader, Amant, to read these books as a means of improving himself, and Gower himself, as the ultimate author of the text. Thus we have three male readers who endorse the story of Lancelot as a useful tool for self-betterment. Furthermore, as Richard J. Moll notes, Robert Mannyng in his 1338 *Chronicle* “provides some evidence for the popularity of these works in England. The romances of Arthur that ‘France men wrote in prose’ are works that Mannyng says ‘we of him here alle rede’” (1.10765-74).<sup>54</sup> Clearly, then, there are a number of male readers in fourteenth-century England.

#### VIII. Lancelot’s Lessons



Yet there remains another parallel to be made, another level of irony that Chaucer as poet imposes upon the Nun's Priest. If we return to Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, we find that Lancelot appears a second time at the end of the narrative in that Gower includes him in the litany of famous lovers. It is at this moment that Gower, the narrator, turns away from the court of love, leaving Lancelot and the others for better, more practical matters. Chaucer follows a similar pattern in his *Canterbury Tales*, if we take the *Parson's Tale* to be the intended finale. At the very least, we have the retraction in which Chaucer abjures romance for religion. Let us consider a handful of Chaucer's lovers. As discussed in Chapter 1, in Chaucer's early poetry, Tristan appears briefly, with no background; however, like the Lancelot allusions, we can infer that Chaucer expects his audience to be familiar with this branch of the legend—especially the manner in which Tristan dies—still pining away for Iseult. Troilus as well dies for love; however, he is granted a revelation as his spirit departs the earthly realm.

Lancelot, however, comes to quite a different end. In the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, after driving out Mordred's sons and bringing order back to Arthur's court (which we may read as atoning for his sins), Lancelot withdraws to a hermitage, where for "Four years and more [he] lived [...], so that no one could endure more effort or labor, for he endured fasting and vigils, prayers and orisons and mortification of the flesh in every way he could" (5.310).<sup>55</sup> While we are not presented with the moment of Lancelot's death, we are assured by the bishop that Lancelot has achieved entry into heaven.

Of course, one could argue that Chaucer does not know how Lancelot's story concluded. But let us consider the pilgrim to whom the story has been assigned. We know, from the example of the Wife of Bath, that Chaucer was quite deliberate in matching his pilgrims with their stories, and I agree with George Lyman Kittredge's observation that the Canterbury pilgrims "do not exist for the sake of the stories, but *vice versa*."<sup>56</sup> We are given almost no information about the pilgrim who relates the fable of Chauntecleer—but we are given, in place of a proper name, a title—the "Nonnes Preest" (7.2809); in other words, he is defined by his relationship to a nun. Remember that Guinevere becomes a nun and Lancelot a priest in the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*. I am not, by any means, implying a romantic relationship between the Prioress and the Nun's Priest. However, I would argue that the Nun's Priest, despite being as sharp-eyed as a hawk,<sup>57</sup> fails to recognize the parallel and resulting contrast between his life and that of Lancelot because he focuses only on the middle story of Lancelot. In other words, in his desire to prove his intellectual superiority to the Prioress, he only demonstrates that he is her equal, mired in worldly conceits.

In addition, as discussed above, the Nun's Priest uses this reference to Lancelot as a means of expressing his derision towards women. But let us briefly consider the role that women play in both Chrétien's *Charrette* and the Prose *Lancelot*. The Lady of the Lake takes on a traditionally masculine role by advising Lancelot about becoming a knight; in fact, much of her counsel involves religion. For example, she tells Lancelot that "kighthood was established to defend the Holy Church" and that "The double edge [of the knight's sword] signifies that the knight

must be a soldier of Our Lord and His people” (2.59).<sup>58</sup> The fact that he goes on to become one of the greatest knights indicates the value of her counsel. Guinevere herself girds on the sword that completes his ritual knighting, and inspires every deed, without which he would be nothing. Truly, these women allow these men to achieve so much more than what would be possible without them. Yet at the same time, these women endure great suffering—and the Prioress gives no indication of following their example on that front. Instead, she is content to remain a poor imitation of Guinevere; that is, she adopts the chaff, the superficial trappings of the romance heroine, but she leaves the wheat to rot in the sun. If the Nun’s Priest was a reliable reader of Arthurian texts, then we might make the claim that the Nun’s Priest criticizes the Prioress for her failure to follow Guinevere’s example of inspiring men to achieve greatness. After all, like Lancelot in Chrétien’s *Charrette*, he is defined entirely by women, and when they fall short of the mark, then his leash is likewise drastically shortened.

At the same time, through his reference to Lancelot, the Nun’s Priest also reveals himself to be a poor reader of the Arthurian legend in that he focuses only on the bad, and ignores the ending. When we return to the end of the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, we find that once he begins to repent for his sins and removes Guinevere from his thoughts, Lancelot finds a new source of inspiration, and his four years of labor and sacrifice yields the highest reward: the attainment of heaven. While the Nun’s Priest has turned away from the Prioress, disgusted by her example, he is still too focused on worldly matters. He is overly eager to please the host, and to prove

himself, by way of deriding his fellow religious members, to the pilgrims. As Manning notes, “The Narrator seems to be providing something for everybody,”<sup>59</sup> and the breadth of scholarship on the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* attests to the plethora of interpretive meanings.

Of course, there is one other impoverished member of the religious estate among the members of the pilgrimage: the Parson. However, whereas the Parson’s lack of material success attests to his spiritual wealth (after all, he does not even have a worn-out nag upon which to visit his parish [1.495]), the Nun’s Priest, through his choice of tale, reveals that the only thing which he holds in common with the Parson is poverty. When Harry Bailey turns to the Parson for the final tale, he requests that the latter “Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones!” (10.29); his words suggest that he initially identifies the Parson with the Nun’s Priest, for the Host requests a fable, the same genre which the Nun’s Priest has related earlier on the pilgrimage, and he swears by “cokkes bones,” recalling the avian nature of Chauntecleer. In addition, he addresses the Parson as “Sire preest” (10.22), the same address used for the Nun’s Priest at the conclusion of the latter’s tale. As Benson notes in his notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, “cokkes bones” is a euphemism for God’s bones; however, I argue that the combination of these three elements—“fable,” “cokkes,” and “Sire preest”—represents the Host’s attempt to align the Parson and the Nun’s Priest. However, the Parson rejects such an identification, for he tells Harry Bailey:

‘Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,  
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,

Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse

And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.’ (10.31-34)

Not only does the Parson denounce fables in his response; he also reinterprets the same Biblical authority invoked by the Nun’s Priest at the end of his tale (“For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis” [7.3441-42]).

Whereas the Nun’s Priest suggests that any story of old may be used for instruction, he overlooks the potential for the chaff to be mistaken for the wheat, for as the Parson notes, “Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?” (10.35-36). In other words, why dress up the message to such an extent that the audience may become distracted by the trappings and miss the intent? The Parson will not speak of talking chickens; instead, he offers a “myrie” tale on penance—one which is told in prose rather than verse, and one which reveals the path to heaven (10.46)—and we find the same thing in the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*. Remember the two traits that consistently accompany any depiction of Lancelot, regardless of the tradition: he is the ideal knight and lover. And what makes him so is his ability to set his sights on one goal and to achieve it at any cost. He maintains an admirable focus—initially on Guinevere, and finally on God—that even “Moral Gower” finds him a worthy model.

Thus the Nun’s Priest’s brief mention of the “book of Launcelot” begins to reveal the extent to which the Arthurian legend is embedded into the social fabric of Chaucer’s time. Regardless of gender, members of the religious estate exhibit a wide array of consumption and attitudes towards the Matter of Britain, although ultimately

the three representatives discussed here prove to be less than ideal consumers of the legend in that they select only the parts of the story which support their particular world views. When viewed through an Arthurian lens, Harry Bailey's words immediately following the completion of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* take on new meaning; Harry Bailey now calls him "Sire Nonnes Preest" (7.4637), whereas before the tale, it was "thou preest [...] thou sir John!" (7.4000). The Nun's Priest has proven, through his story, that he is enmeshed in the world around him, that he is no better than the Prioress, and the Host indicates this by addressing him as a man purely defined by the woman he serves, however unwillingly. As a result, the Nun's Priest's failure to read fully the Arthurian legend becomes symptomatic of his world view—although his final words instruct his audience to "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (7.3443), he has neglected to heed his own words. By dismissing the legend of Lancelot, he overlooks the message of forgiveness and reward that is offered in Lancelot's final days. He is so caught up in his misogynistic vision of how the world should be, and in expressing his frustration at not achieving more, that he proves himself to be as blind as Chauntecleer, endlessly forgetting the shadow lurking in the den.

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston, 1987), cited parenthetically by book and line number in the text. The implications of the Arthurian references of the *Squire's Tale* are discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Archibald, "Lancelot as Lover in the English Tradition before Malory," *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004) 210.

<sup>3</sup> Alison Stones, "Secular manuscript illumination in France," *Medieval Manuscripts and Textual Criticism*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1976) 83-102.

<sup>4</sup> William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 140.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Donald Kennedy, "Gower, Chaucer, and French Prose Arthurian Romance," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 64.

<sup>6</sup> D.S. Brewer, "Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance," *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974) 256.

<sup>7</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> All quotations of the French Prose *Lancelot* are from Alexandre Micha, ed., *Lancelot: Romance en prose du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 9 vols. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978-82), cited parenthetically by the division and section of the *Lancelot*, and then, following the semicolon, the volume and page number. The translations are from Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993-96), cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg. "plus preudomme qui au siecle soit orendroit" (XXIa.22; 7.258).

<sup>9</sup> "li rois . . . qui plus maintient chevalerie en grant honor et plus avés fait grans biens que nus rois don't l'en ait oï parler dusques chi et selonc Deu et selonc le monde" (Xa.17; 7.97).

<sup>10</sup> All quotations of the French *Lestoire de Merlin* are from H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 8 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908-16), cited parenthetically by the volume and page number. This section was translated by Rupert T. Pickens. "se ele ot biaute en lui plus y ot bonte & larguece & courtoisie . sens & valour douchour & deboinarete" (2.158).

<sup>11</sup> This section was translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg. "fu la dame des dames et la fontaine de biauté" (XXIIa.22; 7.274).

<sup>12</sup> Quotations of the French Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus* are from H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 8 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908-16), cited parenthetically by the volume

and page number. This section was translated by Norris J. Lacy. “Et neporquant il amoit la roine de si grant amor [tot creust il bien que ele li eust mesfet] que il fu legierement vencus” (6.307).

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy 66.

<sup>14</sup> This section was translated by Samuel N. Rosenberg. “soignes est noians” (44a.1; 7.435).

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy 66.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy 65.

<sup>17</sup> Other Middle English spellings of “mordre” include: “morthre,” “morthre,” “murther,” “murthre,” “mirther,” “murder,” “murder,” “mourdre,” “mourdure,” and “moerdre,” according to the *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Mordre.” Interestingly, “mordred” is included in the entry as an erroneous form of spelling. Chaucer’s preferred spelling of this word and its grammatical variations uses the “ordr” forms rather than the “orth” or “urth” forms, which suggests the Mordred link is unintentional; nonetheless, an audience well-versed in Arthuriana would probably hear Mordred’s name with the close repetition of this word. Variations of this word appear frequently in this tale; see lines 3005, 3021, 3041, 3049, 3051, 3052, 3053, 3057, 3113, and 3114.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Disbrow argues that the “reference to ‘Launcelot de Lake’ in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is a particularly pointed attack on Arthurian material” in “The Wife of Bath’s Old Wives’ Tale,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 (1986): 70.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Dean, *Arthur of England: English attitudes to King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 156.

<sup>20</sup> For example, he says that “My tale is of a cok” (7.3252).

<sup>21</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Tale,” “Storie.”

<sup>22</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Bok.”

<sup>23</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Treu.”

<sup>24</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Reverence.”

<sup>25</sup> Derek Brewer, *English Gothic Literature* (London: MacMillan, 1983) 86.

<sup>26</sup> All Italian quotations and translations from Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno, The Divine Comedy*, trans. Mark Musa, 6 vol. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); the translations are cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number, and the Italian by canto and stanza number. The Italian reads, “Galeotto fu ‘l libro e chi lo scrisse” (5.137). Kennedy notes this possible connection (64), as does John M. Manly in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (London: Harrap, 1928), and Richard Guerin in “The Nun’s Priest and Canto V of the *Inferno*,” *English Studies* 54 (1973): 313-15.

<sup>27</sup> “Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / ne la miseria” (5.121-23).

<sup>28</sup> Typically “divyne” is not taken as a noun (“theologian”) in this line, for as Susan H. Cavanaugh indicates in the explanatory notes to the *Riverside Chaucer*, “divyne” may be read as either an adjective or a verb depending on how one understands the



preceding “kan” (940.n.3266); that is, the line may be translated either as “I am not able to find harm in women” or “I do not know harm in regards to divine [i.e., religious] women.” I have opted for the latter meaning.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Neuse, *Chaucer’s Dante: Allegory and Epic Theater in The Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 89.n.60.

<sup>30</sup> Cavanaugh 935.n.2810.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur T. Broes, “Chaucer’s Disgruntled Cleric: *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*,” *PMLA* 78.3 (June 1963): 156.

<sup>32</sup> R.M. Lumiansky suggests (and I agree) that the Host “is contemptuous towards the Nun’s Priest “because this churchman is under the supervision of a woman, the Prioress” in *Of Sundry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980) 110.

<sup>33</sup> Broes 159.

<sup>34</sup> Cavanaugh 806.n.164.

<sup>35</sup> All quotations of the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu* are from Augusto Magnē, ed., *A Demanda do Santo Graal*, 3 vols. (Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1944), cited parenthetically by the division of the *Mort Artu*, and then, following the semicolon, the volume and page number. The translations are from Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993-96), cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Martha Asher. “E ela havia consigo ùa donzela de grã guisa e que presara ordem por amor dela” (687; 2.371).

<sup>36</sup> Richard J. Schoeck, “Chaucer’s Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart,” *The Bridge, A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian Studies*, vol. 2, ed. John M. Oesterreicher (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956) 239-55. Rpt. in Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, eds., *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960) 247.

<sup>37</sup> D. S. Brewer, “The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially ‘Harley Lyrics’, Chaucer, and Some Elizabethans,” *Modern Language Review* 50.3 (July 1955): 257-269.

<sup>38</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Grei.”

<sup>39</sup> The Middle English Breton lay *Erle of Tolous* (composed in the late fourteenth century, but appears in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century manuscripts) also uses this phrase to describe Dame Beulybon: “Hur eyen were gray as any glas” (*Erle of Tolous, The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 340.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas J. Farrell, “The Prioress’s Fair Forehead,” *Chaucer Review* 42.2 (2007): 211.

<sup>41</sup> “Car che estoit la dame del monde qui miex estoit enresnie de loquense & de raison” (2.218).

<sup>42</sup> Daniel F. Pigg, “Refiguring Martyrdom: Chaucer’s Prioress and Her Tale,” *Chaucer Review* 29.1 (1994): 69.

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- <sup>43</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 170.
- <sup>44</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1937) 89.
- <sup>45</sup> Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Clothing: Clerical and Academic Costume in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*, *Chaucer Studies* 34 (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005) 30, 36.
- <sup>46</sup> Ridley 804.n.121.
- <sup>47</sup> See Chapter 3 of Hodges's *Chaucer and Clothing*, as well as Sister Mary Madeleva, *Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays* (New York: D. Appleton, 1925).
- <sup>48</sup> Muscatine also comments on "the ambiguous motto of the Prioress, in which secular love is encircled by the divine (170).
- <sup>49</sup> "Onde avêo que, pois houve de sofrer as lazeiras da ordem, que nom havia em custome, caeu logo em cama e enfermidade, que todos aquêles que a viam haviam maior afã, ca em sa morte, ca em sa vida" (687; 2.371).
- <sup>50</sup> Steven Botterill, "Re-reading Lancelot: Dante, Chaucer, and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*," *Philological Quarterly* 67 (1988): 279-289.
- <sup>51</sup> Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr., "The Nun's Priest's Tale as Chaucer's anti-tragedy," *The Living Middle Ages: Studies in Mediaeval English Literature and its Tradition. A Festschrift for Karl Heinz Göller*, ed. Uwe Böker, Manfred Markus, and Rainer Schöwerling (Stuttgart: Belser, 1989) 87-102.
- <sup>52</sup> Translation and French quotation is from Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre dou Voir Dit (The Book of the True Poem)*, ed. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland, 1998). "par ma foy se ce que vous mescriez tenoit autant comme li rommans de la rose ou de lancelet il me men anuieroit mie a lire" (L7; 102).
- <sup>53</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).
- <sup>54</sup> Richard J. Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Late Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) 31.
- <sup>55</sup> "Quatro anos e mais foi Lançalot na ermida assi que nê uũ homem nom poderia de afã mais e de trabalho sofrer, ca el sofria em jejũar e em velar e em prezes e em orações fazer e em estrangeir sas carnes de tōdalas guises que podia" (696; 2.378).
- <sup>56</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915). Qtd. in Arthur T. Broes, "Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: *The Nun's Priest's Tale*," *PMLA* 78.3 (June 1963): 156.
- <sup>57</sup> The Host describes the Nun's Priest in such a manner at the conclusion of the latter's tale: "He loketh as a sperhawk with his yen" (7.3457).
- <sup>58</sup> The French quotation is from *Lancelot*, ed. Alexandre Micha, Vol. 7 (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1980). "Chevalier fu establis outreement por Sainte Eglise garandir" (XXIa.11; 7.250) and "Li doi trenchant senefient que li chevaliers doit ester serjans a Nostre Signor et a son pueple" (XXIa.14; 7.252).
- <sup>59</sup> Stephen Manning, "Fabular Jangling and Poetic Vision in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*," *South Atlantic Review* 52.1 (January 1987): 13.

PART II: ARTHURIAN CREATIONS IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

## CHAPTER 4: LANCELOT REBORN—THE PILGRIM SQUIRE’S WARNING

At the beginning of Chaucer’s romance *The Squire’s Tale*, the Tartar king Cambyuskan, perhaps more familiar to modern audiences as Genghis Khan, celebrates his birthday with a lavish feast, when suddenly a strange knight enters the hall. In order to communicate clearly to his audience the courtly manner in which this exotic knight greets those in attendance, the pilgrim Squire turns to the Arthurian legend, noting that “That Gawayn, with his olde curteisye, / Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye, / Ne koude hym nat amende with a word” (5.95-97).<sup>1</sup> Thus having acquainted his audience with the manner in which the strange knight speaks, the pilgrim Squire continues his tale. The stranger knight has come on behalf of the King of Arabia and India, and bears four marvelous gifts: a steed of brass and a magic sword for Cambyuskan, and an enchanted ring and mirror for Cambyuskan’s daughter Canacee. The stranger then alights and joins the festivities, which are so sumptuous that the pilgrim Squire is unable to describe them:

Who koude telle yow the forme of daunces  
 So unkouthe, and swiche fresshe contenaunces,  
 Swich subtil lookyng and dissymulynges  
 For drede of jalouse mennes aperceyvynge?  
 No man but Launcelot, and he is deed. (5.283-87)

Through these two Arthurian references, the pilgrim Squire indicates that he is well-versed in Arthurian lore, and he expects his audience to be as well. More importantly, with this reference, and with the subsequent mention of Lancelot, the pilgrim Squire sends a carefully constructed message to his fellow pilgrim whose tale has just preceded his. That is, the Merchant in his tale of old January's cuckolding at the hands of his wife May and his squire Damian has offered a demeaning portrait of squires as lecherous traitors.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of whether or not the Merchant's disparaging remarks regarding squires is directed specifically at the pilgrim Squire, the latter warns the Merchant that he is the modern incarnation of Arthur's two greatest knights and will not tolerate such abuse of his vocation.

Yet such a threat is not well-received by the Squire's fellows, for the pilgrim Franklin abruptly interrupts the Squire's story after nearly seven hundred lines. Because of the extent to which the Arthurian legend has pervaded fourteenth century English society, as discussed in previous chapters, the Franklin recognizes the Squire's rash threat. Despite the class difference (the Franklin is a member of the bourgeois, whereas the Squire is a member of the aristocracy), the Franklin feels compelled to respond, cautiously reinterpreting the pilgrim Squire's concept of chivalrous behavior with his romance of Arveragus and Dorigen, and offering an alternative manner of response, one which emphasizes patience over retaliation, to the Merchant's harmful comments. Thus in this chapter, I focus on the intertextuality between *The Merchant's Tale*, *The Squire's Tale*, and the *Franklin's Tale*, namely the emphases placed upon perception, loyalty, and treason, and examining the ways in

which each narrator depicts squires and consequently defines (or redefines) chivalrous behavior.

#### I. Establishing the Pilgrim Squire as an Arthurian Authority: Gawain's Courtesy

In the first of the pilgrim Squire's two Arthurian allusions, Gawain is linked in Chaucer's mind with courtesy—no other knight is as frequently associated with this particular trait, and numerous texts prove evidence for Gawain's courtesy. For example, in the British tradition, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the residents of Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert's castle whisper excitedly about the opportunity to learn courtesy from Gawain's example, and Bertilak's wife reminds Gawain that he is “so cortays and coynt of your hetes” (1525).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the French tradition also speaks to this trait; the Prose *Lancelot* indicates that Gawain was “more courteous than any knight at the court. This courtesy inspired many ladies to love him, less for his chivalry than for his courtesy” (3.108).<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Chaucer's Squire notes that Gawain “were comen ayeyn out of Fairye.” As Whiting comments in his study of Gawain's character in the Middle Ages, “Gawain's original mistress was a fairy, queen of the other world, and nameless,”<sup>5</sup> and Dorothy Bethurum adds that the association of Arthur and his knights with the supernatural world was traditional, noting that “Gawain's participation in otherworld contests and jousts was the most conspicuous feature of his late medieval reputation.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the Squire establishes

himself as a knowledgeable consumer of the Arthurian legend; that is, he is familiar with its major players and their distinguishing characteristics.

Perhaps more importantly, though, the pilgrim Squire mentions Gawain in an attempt to define himself in a context which threatens to misidentify him. Following several tales which offer pejorative views of knights and squires (particularly the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, with its nameless rapist knight, and the *Merchant's Tale*), the pilgrim Squire attempts to negotiate his position in relation to the other pilgrims. After all, Harry Bailey requests a tale of love from the Squire, noting that ““certes ye / Konnen theron as muche as any man’” (5.2-3), and given the Squire's description in the *General Prologue*, we should not be surprised to find that Chaucer chooses to have the sole reference to King Arthur's most courteous knight fall from the Squire's lips. According to the *General Prologue*, the Squire is “A lovyere and a lusty bachelor” and “Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable” (1.80, 1.99). And just as the pilgrim Squire serves his father at the table, Gawain frequently fulfills this role; for example, in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, a text which Chaucer the pilgrim references in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Gawain appears as the king's “trenchepayne” (514).<sup>7</sup> As Osgerby notes, “Gawain is the perfect example of the educated man, the ‘complete’ gentleman”—that is, he has compassion, eloquence, and integrity—the very traits of a knight which the Squire seeks to cultivate in himself.<sup>8</sup> Haller continues this thought, suggesting that the Squire “wishes to be thought of as equaling Gawain in ‘olde curteisye.’”<sup>9</sup> Thus through his reference to Gawain, the Squire attempts to distinguish himself from the derogatory examples offered by his fellow pilgrims.

## II. Invoking Lancelot: The Squire's Objection to Damian

Another Arthurian reference occurs nearly two hundred lines later. Following the presentation of the strange knight's marvelous gifts, the hall falls to revelry.

Reluctant to describe these events, the Squire simply says,

Who koude telle yow the forme of daunces  
 So unkouthe, and swiche fresshe contenaunces,  
 Swich subtil lookyng and dissymulynges  
 For drede of jalouse mennes aperceyvynge?  
 No man but Launcelot, and he is deed. (5.283-87)

Scholars have been at odds to determine what exactly is going on here. Does this passage present Lancelot as an expert courtly dissimulator, or does it refer to his narrative abilities? The syntax suggests that it is the latter; in other words, the interrogative pronoun "Who" in the first line is replaced by Lancelot in the final line. No man but Lancelot is capable of describing the dances and coy glances exchanged among the revelers. As Vincent J. DiMarco notes, "there is no apparent basis (other than the idea that a perfect knight is also a perfect courtier) for the narrative skill the Squire here attributes to him."<sup>10</sup> After all, the youthful Lancelot frequently fails to hide his passion. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner notes, "Lancelot's love for Guenevere appears to be an open secret for a number of female characters" in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*,<sup>11</sup> and in the Prose *Lancelot*, Galehaut, Morgan

le Fey, and even Arthur himself, following the episode of the False Guinevere, quickly perceive Lancelot's love for the queen. When we examine the various Arthurian references in the *dits* of Machaut, Froissart, and Deschamps, from which Chaucer frequently drew, a tradition linking Lancelot with narrative skill and ability to dissemble remains conspicuously absent; in fact, in Machaut's *Le Livre dou Voir Dit*, it was due to the strength and purity of their love that the affair was discovered: "with pure affection did they not so love / That their affair—and what a tragedy— / Was known and discovered thereby?" (6411-13).<sup>12</sup>

There are times when Lancelot is required (and able) to keep a straight face, particularly during his later years; for example, despite his close affiliation with Lancelot throughout the Prose *Lancelot* and his swift perception of Perceval's love meditation in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Gawain fails to learn of Lancelot's love for the queen until their carelessness in the Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus* reveals the affair to his brother: "whereas [Lancelot] had previously indulged his sinful passion so prudently and so discreetly that no one knew of it, now he behaved so foolishly that it became apparent to Sir Gawain's brother Agravain" (4.91).<sup>13</sup> The *Queste del Saint Graal* likewise reveals his ability to play the virtuous knight. However, for the most part of the youthful knight's life, such dissimulations and "subtil lookyng" are unknown to a lover as true as Lancelot. In addition, Lancelot is not known to be fluent in the latest dance trends; the only time when Lancelot partakes in dancing is during his adventures in the Prose *Lancelot*, when he is caught up in a magic dance—but when the enchantment is broken, Lancelot continues on his adventures as if



nothing has happened. Nor is Lancelot typically remembered for his eloquent outbursts; he is much more prone to fainting spells and silent trances, as is evidenced by Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* when Lancelot happens upon a comb containing a few strands of Guinevere's golden hair. Instead, Gawain seems a much more likely candidate for the Squire to reference at this moment in the tale.

Some scholars use these lines to argue a lack of knowledge regarding the Arthurian legend on the part of the pilgrim Squire; for example, Karl Heinz Göller claims that "the Squire's reference to Lancelot, like his reference to Gawain at line 95, betrays a superficial knowledge of romance literature; whereas Lancelot was often associated with a destructive, almost demonic love, the Squire associates him with dancing and the like, that is, with the externalities of courtly life."<sup>14</sup> Osgerby offers a similar, equally disparaging interpretation: "Launcelot's [name] was a byword for unfaithfulness. His kind of 'courtly love,' the Squire implies, is 'deed' because it is barren."<sup>15</sup> Yet as discussed above, the Squire's knowledge of Gawain is not superficial in that he knows of Gawain's association with courtesy and his removal to the land of "Fairye." Second, I disagree with Osgerby's assessment of Lancelot's love, for it is in no way presented as barren, much less demonic, in the Prose *Lancelot* or in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*; in fact, I would argue that Lancelot is presented as a Christ figure in Chrétien's *Charrete*, particularly in the manner in which his coming is foretold and his freeing of the people trapped in the land of Gorre. In addition, in the Prose *Lancelot*, due to his love for Guinevere, Lancelot

saves Arthur's kingdom no less than three times,<sup>16</sup> and the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, it is Lancelot who avenges Arthur's death by killing Mordred's sons.

In terms of his spiritual state, Lancelot's love for Guinevere propels him to seek out adventure in order to succor the weak and defenseless, whereas other knights merely seek glory; in fact, in the Prose *Lancelot*, as Lancelot begins to attain fame, he "came to the decision that he would go about in secret, so that he should not be recognized as a man bent on winning fame and honor" (2.73).<sup>17</sup> Although Lancelot's love for Guinevere places him in mortal sin for much of the *Queste del Saint Graal*, in the Post-Vulgate *Mort Artu*, as discussed in preceding chapters, it is that very love for Guinevere which leads Lancelot to an hermitage to serve out the remainder of his days in religious contemplation and good deeds.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, several other knights, as they have throughout his lifetime, choose to follow Lancelot's example and join him in the hermitage; clearly Lancelot's love yields spiritual fruit, albeit unconventional. Ultimately, Lancelot's love is spiritual and constructive, not destructive as Göller claims, nor barren as Osgerby suggests, in that he leads others to Christian salvation.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, it initially seems that the Squire would have been more successful with his Arthurian name-dropping if he had mentioned Gawain when describing the dancing—not Lancelot. After all, as shown throughout the Prose *Lancelot* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is quite nimble with his tongue, and he often reads a situation quite clearly. Gawain would be expected to be an excellent narrator, and Coolidge Otis Chapman has already pointed out the parallels in structure between

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Squire's Tale*.<sup>20</sup> We might, then, expect the Squire to invoke Gawain again when it comes time to describe the dancing and intrigues of the court. However, he instead opts to link Lancelot with the narration of exotic forms and concealments.

I propose an alternative reading to those suggested by Göller and Osgerby—namely, that because the pilgrim Squire has a thorough knowledge of romance literature (as is evidenced by his earlier use of Gawain's name), he deliberately chooses Lancelot, expecting his audience to associate Lancelot with fidelity. Let us turn to the preceding tale, that of the Merchant, where we meet the notorious squire Damian. When we place this tale alongside that of the pilgrim Squire, a number of parallels emerge. Both describe feasting beyond a mere mortal's power of description. Naturally dancing and drinking take place at such an event, and a particular character appears at this point in each narrative. For the Merchant, it is Damian, who “carf biforn the knight ful many a day” (4.1773). We have heard an echo of this phrase in the *General Prologue*, where we are told by Chaucer that the pilgrim Squire himself “carf biforn his fader at the table” (1.100). In addition, Damian is a squire, and is associated, through his lust, with a character named May—remember that the pilgrim Squire is “as fresh as is the month of May” (1.92), and the Merchant describes his female character repeatedly as “fresshe May” (4.1782).<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the Merchant directs his tale toward the pilgrim Squire, placing him in a derogatory category with all squires, we cannot know. Nonetheless, the initial

disparaging similarities between the pilgrim Squire and Damian would, I argue, be immediately apparent to the pilgrim Squire.

As a result, the pilgrim Squire receives the Merchant's tale as a personal insult and seeks through a number of verbal echoes to respond to the Merchant's treatment of squires and courtly love. As Baum suggests, the Squire "disapproved of the inelegant tone and temper of the bourgeois Merchant."<sup>22</sup> Marie Neville offers a similar interpretation of the Squire's lines regarding the "subtil looking and dissimulynges" of the dancers at the king's feast: "In these days of dullness and suspicion, [the Squire] says, only one who has known the full meaning of the service of love can describe the true sociability of a feast. Only Lancelot, exemplar of courtesy, could describe the decorous coquetry of life without bursting into a denunciation of love."<sup>23</sup> While I agree with Neville's opinion that the *Squire's Tale* offers a contrast specifically to the *Merchant's Tale*, I disagree with her claim that "the Squire, courteous and modest as he is, [does not intend] anything like overt rebuke to either."<sup>24</sup> I propose that the pilgrim Squire takes offense at these comments, and through his use of the reference to Lancelot, attempts to establish his superiority over the Merchant while subtly warning him. When the pilgrim Squire talks about the dancing and subtle looks, he is aware that these are not traits typically associated with Lancelot; instead, he evokes Lancelot as a true lover while connecting the situation to that described by the Merchant.

When Damian is struck with longing for May in the *Merchant's Tale*, it is due to Venus, as she "bar it daunsynge in hire hond; / And to his bed he wente hym

hastily” (4.1777-78). Damian’s subsequent bed rest is typical of the courtly lover suffering from love sickness in many romances, but the Merchant’s interpretation of Damian’s malady is not. Immediately the Merchant launches into an attack on Damian:

O famulier foo, that his service bedeth!

O servant traytour, false hoomly hewe,

Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrew

.....

Thyn owene squier and thy borne man,

Entendeth for to do thee vileynye. (4.1784-86; 4.1790-91)

Whereas the courtly lover in romance is helpless against the onslaught of love, in the eyes of the Merchant, Damian becomes actively treacherous, plotting against his lord January.

There are a number of similarities with the central love triangle of Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot within the *Merchant’s Tale*, but as my immediate focus is on the Squire’s reception of the Merchant’s tale, I will not develop those parallels here. However, I would point out that while Damian’s loyalty lies first with January, as he is in the latter’s service before the appearance of May, Lancelot is first and foremost Guinevere’s knight; in fact, during the episode with the False Guinevere in the Prose *Lancelot*, he breaks with Arthur in order to champion Guinevere. Thus Lancelot remains an emblem of loyalty, whereas Damian is false in his service.

In retaliation for the Merchant's diatribe against squires, the pilgrim Squire offers his interpretation of the events at Cambyuskan's hall in *The Squire's Tale*, modifying the events slightly. Once more Venus is present: "Now dauncen lusty Venus children deere" (5.272); however, whereas the Merchant interprets Damian's behavior in terms of treason, the Squire gently chides his audience, reminding them "He moste had knowen love and his servyse / And been a feestlych man as fressh as May / That sholde yow devysen swich array" (5.280-82). In other words, the Merchant, being neither a true lover nor a convivial man, cannot truly describe the events of the wedding, much less Damian's behavior; his words are suspect.

Furthermore, the Squire emphasizes perception and jealousy just prior to his reference to Lancelot: "Swich subtil *lookyng* and dissymulynges / For drede of jalouse mennes *aperceyvynge*" [my emphasis] (5.285-86). However, Lancelot does not fear Arthur's jealousy; he is motivated solely by his desire to please Guinevere. In fact, in the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artus*, once Lancelot has rescued the Queen from the stake and learned he cannot be reconciled to Arthur, "Lancelot was very distressed, not because he feared Arthur, but rather because he loved him greatly" (4.128).<sup>25</sup> The pilgrim Squire is aware of Lancelot's attitude toward Arthur—but he has another point to make regarding his fellow pilgrim, the Merchant. He has listened closely to the Merchant's condemnation of Damian—and his subsequent description of January. For it is "Amydde his lust and his prosperitee" that January is "woxen blynd, and that al sodeynly" (4.2070-71). Closely associated with January's physical blindness is his jealousy; the Merchant uses forms of this word four times in his entire

tale, and the first of which immediately follows the onset of January's blindness:

"And therwithal the fyr of jalousie, / . . . / So brente his herte" (4.2073-75).

We now have a sharp divide between the types of true lovers with whom the pilgrim Squire wishes to be associated, as exemplified by Lancelot, and those treacherous lovers typified by the Merchant in his tale. Both Damian and January actively pursue May to fulfill their desires. In fact, the Merchant uses the same phrases to describe the effect of May's beauty on both January and Damian; for example, each is "ravysshed" by the sight of her (4.1750, 4.1774),<sup>26</sup> and each burns with desire: Damian "in Venus fyr / So brenneth" (4.1875-76) and January fears May's infidelity to such an extent that "So brente his herte" (4.2075). But their desires are the results of lust, not love; remember that January's blindness strikes "Amydde his lust" (4.2070) and May seeks a time when she might "unto [Damian's] lust suffice" (4.1999).

The pilgrim Squire, on the other hand, seeks to serve, rather than be served by a beloved. Although the pilgrim Squire is described by Chaucer the narrator as a "lusty bachelor" in the *General Prologue* (1.80), his actions set him apart from the men of the Merchant's tale in that the latter two seek their own pleasures through May's body, rather than seeking to serve her as a true lover, in the eyes of the pilgrim Squire, should. January and Damian act in sharp contrast to both the pilgrim Squire, who is described in the *General Prologue* as "In hope to stonden in his lady grace" (1.88), and to Lancelot, who would rather die than reveal his love to Guinevere in the *Prose Lancelot*. That is, both the pilgrim Squire and Lancelot feel themselves to be

adequately rewarded merely by the benevolent regard of their beloved, whether it be a kind word from her or the opportunity to gaze on her loveliness.

In addition, the pilgrim Squire's tale of Canacee continues to recall and respond to the Merchant's tale; for example, the female falcon echoes the same phrase found in the *Merchant's Tale* when speaking to Canacee: "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (5.479).<sup>27</sup> Further parallels emerge as she describes her false suitor, a tercelet "That semed welle of alle gentillesse; / Al were he ful of treson and falsnesse" (5.505-06). January describes Damian to May as a "gentil squier" (4.1907), but the omniscient narrator laments that he is a "servant traytour." Furthermore, Damian is "lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrew" (4.1786); the falcon also describes her tercelet as a snake: "Right as a serpent hit hym under floures / Til he may seen his tyme for to byte" (5.512-13). Both Damian and the tercelet appear initially to be worthy suitors, but quickly fail in their service to their beloveds in that once the lady yields her love to the male, she becomes the servant. The male appears to be on the verge of death, and the female succumbs to pity; as the falcon notes, "my wyl obeyed his wyl / In alle thyng" (5.569-70). The tercelet quickly tires of his "newefangelnesse" and finds himself ravished once more by another bird (5.610).

In contrast to the tercelet and squires such as Damian, nearly all of the references to Lancelot in the *dits* of Machaut and Froissart describe Lancelot in terms of his loyalty to Guinevere and of the great deeds and sufferings that he undertook for her sake—two things that are absent from the Merchant's description of Damian.<sup>28</sup> For example, in his *Livre dou Voir Dit*, Machaut writes, "Did not Lancelot pass over /



The sword bridge for his true love / Guenevere, who was the queen” (449).<sup>29</sup> Froissart echoes this idea in his *L'Espinette amoureuse* that Lancelot (among others) has “given up / [His] health in great martyrdom” through his pursuit of honorable deeds in Guinevere’s name” (193).<sup>30</sup> The pilgrim Squire himself has also performed military deeds in order to win regard from his beloved; as the *General Prologue* indicates, he has “been somtyme in chyvachie / . . . / And born hym weel” (1.85-87). Thus by explicitly mentioning Lancelot at this point in his narrative, the Squire rejects the Merchant’s depiction of squires and courtly lovers; the Merchant is, after all, a “dul man” incapable of understanding the subtleties of true love and his character Damian is nowhere near the caliber of the pilgrim Squire (5.279).

### III. Lancelot’s “Death”

There is yet another aspect of the Squire’s Arthurian reference to be explored, however. When Damian slips his love letter to May, he tells her to keep it secret, ““For I am deed if that this thyng be kyd”” (4.1943). The Squire echoes this sentiment in the line “No man but Launcelot, and he is deed” (5.287). Of course, this comment may be taken literally, suggesting that the time is distant when knights such as Lancelot lived. Indeed, Stanley J. Kahrl suggests that through his references to Gawain and Lancelot, the Squire establishes himself as a “representative of a class whose time has gone; he is in training for a place in a world that no longer exists.”<sup>31</sup> Gawain is in the land of Fairy and Lancelot is dead—but are they truly?

The Squire, by his own account, is more familiar with French than his native language of English (“‘Myn Englissh eek is insufficient’” [5.37]) to tell fully the wonders of Cambyuskan’s court. While I agree with Kahrl that this is an example of the Squire’s use of the “modesty topos,”<sup>32</sup> I would point out that since the Squire also has cultivated a reputation as a courtly lover (as evidenced both by the *General Prologue* and the Host’s words prior to his tale), it seems highly unlikely that he would not be familiar with the major French romances of Lancelot—especially the thirteenth-century Prose *Lancelot*.

This cycle of romances spans most of Lancelot’s life, and no fewer than fifteen times false news of Lancelot’s death wreaks havoc on the emotions of Arthur’s court. In fact, Lancelot himself announces his “death” to one of his opponents: “‘But everyone knows everywhere that Lancelot has been dead for over a year’” (3.34).<sup>33</sup> In addition, nearly every time that Lancelot’s death is announced, it is accompanied with a description of the feats that he might have done, had he lived. For example, Banin, upon learning of Lancelot’s supposed death, laments (ironically to Lancelot) that the people of Gaul wait for Lancelot to free them, for he is the only one capable of such deeds: “‘The people of his country want to see him more than all other men, for they are still waiting to be freed by his prowess from the tyranny of Claudas. But it seems to me that they won’t be, because he’s dead’” (3.66).<sup>34</sup> On another adventure, Lancelot, traveling incognito, rescues a maiden and hears once again of his demise when the maiden tells him, “‘I left yesterday morning sad and distressed over the death of the good knight [Lancelot]—a death that’s a loss to us all,

for never again will there be a knight to pity poor maidens like he did'" (3.144).<sup>35</sup>

Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* also offers an episode in which Lancelot is believed to be dead; in fact, the queen is so distressed by the news that she "almost killed herself / When she heard the lying rumor / Of Lancelot's death" (4160-62).<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, when the pilgrim Squire remarks that there is "No man but Launcelot, and he is deed," I argue that he continues this tradition; an audience well-versed in Arthurian literature would know that Lancelot is never truly dead as long as others strive to emulate his example.

Gawain also is not explicitly dead; instead, he is in "Fairye," lingering in the arms of his fairy mistress, and could return at any moment. Peterson is half correct when she states that "Lancelot is 'deed,' but Gawain lives,"<sup>37</sup> for the pilgrim Squire, in his tale and in his life, is determined to keep the memory and the deeds of these two great knights alive well into the fourteenth century. Thus through his references to both Gawain and Lancelot, the pilgrim Squire situates himself as the living embodiment of the Arthurian legend, a position which he views as superior to the world view of the pilgrim Merchant, driven blind, like his January, by jealousy and lust. It is fortunate for the Merchant that he is not a knight; otherwise, he might have to account for his slurs against squires on the battlefield, just as Lancelot frequently is forced to clear his name (and that of Guinevere). For example, during the tourney between the lady of Pomelegoi and the lady of Noauz in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*, the incognito Lancelot is instructed by Guinevere "to do 'his worst'" (5645);<sup>38</sup> despite the volumes of ridicule and abuse that he receives, Lancelot obeys.

Yet once Lancelot is given leave to do his best, Chrétien writes of those who “had spent most of the night and day / Ridiculing [Lancelot], / Were to be astounded” as Lancelot avenges himself on those who had formerly mocked him: “Lancelot taught [the son of the King of Ireland] a lesson / In this joust” (5924-27; 5940-41).<sup>39</sup> Perhaps, the pilgrim Squire implies, he will find an opportunity along the journey to deal a similar blow in exchange for the Merchant’s disparaging words.

As John M. Fyler notes, one of the “most distinctive concerns of the romance narrative [deals with] questions of identity, complicated by disguise or ignorance, distinctions between self and other; the difficulties of making discriminations in a mysterious, magical world.”<sup>40</sup> Chaucer therefore appropriately assigns the genre of romance to his youngest pilgrim; not only must the pilgrim Squire seek to stand apart from the long shadow of his father, the Knight, but he must also deal with the narrow definitions imposed upon him by his fellow pilgrims. Whereas there are squires such as Damian in the world, the pilgrim Squire accompanying the Merchant on this journey has nothing in common with him; furthermore, since neither Gawain nor Lancelot is truly dead, both still present a threat to such figures as the Merchant, who due to his shortcomings, will never understand the true nature of love, and will perpetually be forced to fear the fidelity of his wife.

#### IV. The Pilgrim Squire’s Reception—The Franklin as Mediator

Yet the Squire, after issuing his warning to the Merchant and gaining confidence in his story-telling, is quickly cut off by the Franklin. The Host, rather than rebuking the Franklin for his interruption and allowing the Squire to continue (as he does for the Wife of Bath when interrupted by the Friar), exclaims ““Straw for youre gentillesse!”” and reminds the Franklin of his obligation to tell a story (5.695). There has been much debate already as to whether or not the *Squire’s Tale* is indeed finished as a fragment, or if Chaucer meant to return to it at some later time. For example, the premature termination of the *Cook’s Tale* provides Chaucer with a narrative means of ending the fabliaux contest, and the Host’s interruption of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* suggests the fragment as it exists is complete. John W. Clark, for example, thinks Chaucer meant to go back and finish the tale, while Peterson argues that the *Squire’s Tale* is in its final, intended form as a fragment, and that when the Franklin interrupts him, he does so “*pretending* to think him finished.”<sup>41</sup> Of course, until some document emerges to confirm Chaucer’s intent one way or the other, we can never know with any certainty as to the completion of the *Squire’s Tale*, which makes assessing the pilgrims’ response to the Squire’s tale of Canacee difficult.

Nonetheless, as Pearsall notes, the pilgrim Squire has revealed his contempt for the lower classes (which constitutes the majority of the pilgrims, including the Host),<sup>42</sup> and the outline that the pilgrim Squire provides just before the Franklin’s timely intervention reveals the monstrous scope of his tale—the pilgrims could easily arrive at and return from Canterbury before he reaches the intended ending!<sup>43</sup> However, whereas the Host has nominal control over the story-telling contest, due to

class differences, he is unable to tactfully interrupt the young Squire. Therefore, the Franklin, perhaps sensing the growing irritation among the pilgrims, steps in, artfully praising the pilgrim Squire to avoid offense or to cause further embarrassment on the latter's part, and the Host's subsequent remark ("“Straw for youre gentillesse!”") is indirectly aimed at the Squire. In the following section, I argue that the Franklin's words to the pilgrim Squire and his subsequent tale are meant as a response to the young pilgrim, particularly after the latter's warning to the Merchant.<sup>44</sup> In other words, the Franklin attempts to defuse the potentially volatile situation between the Squire and the Merchant by encouraging the former to hold his tongue (and possibly his sword) and to ignore the Merchant's disparaging words.

As a member of the emerging bourgeois, the landowning Franklin clearly has aspirations to the aristocracy, as indicated by his praise of the pilgrim Squire; he dearly wishes that his own son "were a man of swich discrecioun / As that ye been!" (5.685-86). Of course, the Franklin has not set much of an example for his son to follow, for the *General Prologue* initially describes the Franklin as "Epicurus owene sone / That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit / Was verray felicitee parfit" (1.336-38). He delights in the pleasures of the secular world, and his table is never depleted; it is no surprise, then, that the Franklin reveals to the pilgrim Squire that his son prefers "to pleye at dees, and to despende / And lese al that he hath is his usage" (5.690-91). Yet at the conclusion of the portrait in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer the narrator includes an important detail about the Franklin's occupation: "At sessiouns ther was he lord and sire; / Ful ofte tyme he was knight of the shire" (1.355-56), and "A

shirreve hadde he been, and a contour” (1.359). Although a contour is typically considered to be an “official who oversees the collecting and auditing of taxes for a shire”, it can also refer to “a pleader in court, a lawyer.”<sup>45</sup> That is, in his roles as a member of Parliament and as a sheriff, he is used to mediating and settling disputes.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, we can infer that the Franklin is well versed in dispute mediation, as revealed by his comments in the early sections of his tale.

The Franklin’s tale focuses on issues of “trouthe,” sovereignty, and “gentillesse.” The story opens with the lover Arveragus who is obedient in all things, and is consequently rewarded with the lady Dorigen’s love and hand in marriage. Yet after a year of marriage, Arveragus departs Brittany to pursue the tournament circuit in England, leaving Dorigen to mourn his departure. Meanwhile, the young squire Aurelius falls in love with Dorigen, and when he seeks her love, she playfully tells him that he may have her love once he has removed the dangerous rocks from the coast of Brittany. With the help of a clerk from Orleans, Aurelius is able to create the illusion that the rocks have been removed. When Dorigen learns of this seemingly impossible feat, she despairs, but is ordered by her husband to fulfill her promise. Aurelius, however, is moved by the knight’s noble example, and releases Dorigen from her rash promise.

Yet before the pilgrim Franklin gives any defining characteristics of his major players (in fact, we do not even learn the characters’ names until 5.808, more than 70 lines into the tale), he launches into a tangent on the need to overlook the occasional verbal slight, advising his audience:

For every word men may nat chide or pleyne.

Lerneth to suffer . . . . .

. . . . .

For in this world, certain, ther no wight is

That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys. (5.776-80)

At first glance, these lines seem out of place. That is, the Franklin has just been talking about marriage, and how neither women nor men like to be enslaved to another. There seems to be no clear connection to his story at this point in the telling. Of course, once the tale reaches its conclusion, these words make more sense in that Dorigen speaks unwisely when she tells Aurelius to remove all the rocks. However, the Franklin's immediate audience—that is, his fellow pilgrims—would not know what was coming until the end. But when we consider the larger context of the situation—that is, the Merchant has offended the pilgrim Squire with his tale, and the naïve young man has responded with the threat of retaliation—the Franklin's tangent appears to be intended for the hotheaded pilgrim Squire. In other words, the Franklin, drawing upon his experience as a member of Parliament and as a sheriff, reminds the Squire that patience is a virtue. Before resuming his narrative of Arveragus and Dorigen, the Franklin delivers the final word on the matter: "On every wrong a man may nat be wreken" (5.784). At no point in his tale does the concept of vengeance appear; therefore, I would argue that the Franklin speaks directly to the Squire at this point in his tale, cautioning the younger pilgrim against any rash action. Yet just in



case his message does not sink in, the Franklin follows the pilgrim Squire's example and turns to the Arthurian legend to further dissuade the possibility of revenge.

#### V. The Franklin's Interruption and Tale—Invoking Gawain

A number of scholars see the Franklin as expressing approval of the Squire and his tale; for example, Clark does not see any reason “for being sure that the Franklin might not have liked the *Squire's Tale*,” and points out the Franklin's admiration of the pilgrim Squire's “gentillesse.”<sup>47</sup> Neville also writes that the Franklin “intends primarily to compliment the pilgrim Squire.”<sup>48</sup> Certainly, the Franklin's comments about his own son confirms these judgments. Yet Haller attributes a more subtle motive for the Franklin's high praise, noting that the Franklin's goal in doing so is to “thank the Squire for providing him with the means of imputing himself noble.”<sup>49</sup> However, while I agree with Haller's suggestion that the Franklin has ulterior motives, I disagree that the Franklin seeks self-advancement. I would argue that the Franklin is instructing the pilgrim Squire, cautioning him against revenge against the Merchant. He is delivering his message much as one would deliver medicine to a recalcitrant child—that is, with a spoon full of sugar. He flatters the pilgrim Squire in order to encourage the latter to listen to his message of patience, thereby confirming the Squire's self-identification with Gawain.

Remember the ways in which Gawain is introduced in the *Squire's Tale*; the stranger knight resembles Gawain through his “heigh reverence and obeisaunce, / As

wel in speche as in contenance” (5.93-94). According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, “reverence” entails “respect or courtesy toward someone” while “obeisance” suggests “respectful submission, homage; deference, reverence; courtesy.”<sup>50</sup> These descriptions only serve to highlight the emphasis on courtesy that surrounds Gawain. The Franklin is careful to construct his praise of the pilgrim Squire in similar terms. For example, he tells the latter that ““thow hast thee wel yquit / And gentilly” (5.673-74); in other words, the pilgrim Squire’s behavior is exemplary, equal to that of Gawain. Furthermore, the Franklin informs him that his use of language is similarly peerless: ““So feelingly thou spekest sire . . . / . . . ther is noon that is here / Of eloquence that shal be thy peere” (5.676-78).

When the Franklin begins his tale, which continues the pilgrim Squire’s thread of the courtly lover, he continues this praise and identification with Gawain by tactfully describing his squire Aurelius to parallel the pilgrim Squire in a positive manner.<sup>51</sup> Even though he is a member of the bourgeois, he is nonetheless an authority on Arthurian romance, for as the *General Prologue* indicates, he is “a worthy vavasour” (1.360). This French term denotes a figure often found in the pages of Chrétien’s romances, as Dolores Warwick Frese notes, and Chaucer retains many of the defining traits in his portrait of the Franklin, including his penchant for hospitality.<sup>52</sup> But perhaps most important in the works of Chrétien and Chaucer is the vavasour’s obligation “to assist a young chevalier in his quest for honour [sic] by feats of arms undertaken.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, as an embodiment of the Arthurian legend himself, the Franklin is the ideal figure to direct the young pilgrim Squire along the

proper path, and he does so by placing a number of verbal echoes throughout his own tale, gently chiding while redirecting the pilgrim Squire's hostility.

The Franklin constructs the portrait of his squire very carefully and deliberately in order to evoke the squires of the previous tales as well as the pilgrim Squire himself. For example, the pilgrim Squire is, according to the *General Prologue*, "as fresh as is the month of May" (1.92), the main events of the *Franklin's Tale* also take place in May (5.906). Furthermore, Aurelius "fresher was . . . / . . . than is the month of May" (5.927-28). Because the pilgrim Squire is a "lovyere and a lusty bachelor" (1.80), so too is Aurelius: a "lusty squier, servant to Venus" (5.937). Each squire also possesses similar talents. The pilgrim Squire spends his time riding, singing, dancing, jousting, and writing songs and poetry (1.94-96.); therefore, it is no surprise that Aurelius performs these same accomplishments: "He syngeth, daunceth," (5.929), and composes "manye layes, / Songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes" (5.947-48).

Perhaps most importantly, though, both squires are virtuous, at least as implied by the Franklin when he says of Aurelius that he is "Yong, strong, right virtuous, and riche, and wys" (5.933). He very deliberately establishes his squire as "Oon of the best farynge man on lyve" (5.932). Although Aurelius bears a superficial resemblance to the Merchant's offending squire Damian in that he insists he will die without Dorigen's mercy ("Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do me deye!" [5.978]), Aurelius performs the deed required to win her love whereas Damian does nothing.<sup>54</sup>

## VI. The Franklin's Invitation

Yet not only does the Franklin offer a flattering portrait of squires in his tale; he also presents Arveragus as a model of perfection toward which the pilgrim Squire should strive. For not only is Arveragus, like the pilgrim Squire and Aurelius, "lusty" (5.1091) and "fresshe" (5.1092); he is also "of chivalrie the flour" (5.1088).

Throughout the Arthurian corpus, there are three knights who typically receive the epithet "the flower of chivalry": Gawain, Hector, and most frequently, Lancelot.

Through the pilgrim Squire's Arthurian references, the Franklin picks up on the younger pilgrim's desire to reach the heights of chivalry held by Gawain and Lancelot, and now offers his advice on how the pilgrim Squire may best achieve his goals without explicitly displacing the aristocratic youth as the prevailing Arthurian authority. After all, it is in his character to instruct younger men such as the pilgrim Squire, as the Franklin tells us himself that he often has "My sone snybbed" (5.688). Through Arveragus, therefore, the Franklin instructs the pilgrim Squire that "'Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe'" (5.1479), and that one must, like Arveragus, suffer perceived slights: "'As I may best, I wol my wo endure'" (5.1484). If the pilgrim Squire decides to identify with Arveragus, and by extension, Lancelot and Gawain, he must have patience with the Merchant.

But as Neville notes, a medieval audience would have seen Aurelius's sacrifice as greater because "As a knight, Arveragus had a higher obligation than Aurelius to honor a promise."<sup>55</sup> In case the Franklin has misread the pilgrim Squire's

aspirations, he offers Aurelius as an equally compelling model for emulation when Aurelius decides that “fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde / Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse” (5.1522-24). The pilgrim Squire, through his tale, has shown his concern with “gentillesse”, so the Franklin hits the mark when he has his squire tell Dorigen, after relieving her of her sexual obligation, that ““Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede / As wel as kan a knight”” (5.1544-45). Regardless of whether the pilgrim Squire chooses to align himself with the squire or the knight of the *Franklin’s Tale*, he comes out on top, unlike the male lovers of *The Merchant’s Tale*.

## VII. Aristocratic Arthurian Authority

In the previous chapter, I explore the ways in which the religious estate misuses the Arthurian legend; while the Prioress attempts to mimic the superficial trappings of queens such as Guinevere, the Nun’s Priest dismisses the legend’s potential for moral lessons and therefore is ignorant of its parallels to his own life. Although the pilgrim Squire’s use of the Arthurian legend may be viewed as an attempt to familiarize an audience composed largely of the lower estate with the exotic setting of *The Squire’s Tale*, the overall tone of his tale suggests instead that he looks down upon his fellow pilgrims with disdain; they are part of the “lewed peple” and therefore should marvel at his narrative ability (5.221).<sup>56</sup> Thus I argue that the aristocratic estate also abuses the Arthurian legend in that the pilgrim Squire sees it as

establishing his superiority over others and as authorizing him to vengeance. Like the Prioress, he seeks to imitate art in life; but as the Franklin points out, the pilgrim Squire too has a superficial understanding as to the true nature of knights such as Lancelot or Gawain, who understand, as does Arveragus, that “On every wrong a man may nat be wreken” (5.784).

Although the Franklin offers high praise for the pilgrim Squire, both directly in his interruption and in his description of Aurelius, when we consider the pilgrim Squire’s portrait placement in the larger context of the *General Prologue*, we see, as Peterson notes, that “the narrator imposes on him a judgment which is tacitly negative.”<sup>57</sup> That is, the pilgrim Squire’s description, when taken in isolation, is fairly impartial; he is a typical youth who enjoys outdoor sports and the pursuit of love. However, his portrait immediately follows that of the Knight, whom Peterson identifies as the “genuine article of knightliness [ . . . ] who reflects in his person and in his tale a proper perspective on courtliness; the Squire, by contrast, tells a trivial tale because he is a trivial person.”<sup>58</sup> Although both members of the aristocracy have engaged in military pursuits, the quality of that of the pilgrim Squire’s is somewhat suspect. While Chaucer the narrator devotes twenty-one lines to the Knight’s endeavors, only two lines are given to the pilgrim Squire’s efforts. More importantly, the Knight fights for “cristendom” (1.49), a cause much larger than himself; on the other hand, the Squire fights for “hope to stonden in his lady grace” (1.88). His concern is immediate and selfish. Furthermore, their appearances contrast; the Knight’s tunic is “Al bismotered with his habergeon” (1.76) while the Squire sports a

tunic “Embrouded . . . / Al ful of fresshe floures” (1.89-90). Once more, his concern with appearances is evident; like the Nun’s Priest, he mistakes the “chaf” for the “fruyt.”

Ultimately, while the Knight embodies the traits which set Lancelot and Gawain apart in all of his actions, the pilgrim Squire offers only a pale imitation of such virtue. Although he claims to be the reincarnation of Lancelot, he falls far short of his idol, as the Franklin realizes. But perhaps he will prove akin to another Arthurian knight, Perceval, who deigns to learn from the various mentors whom he meets along his journey. The Franklin might be just such a mentor, and the fact that his tale, unlike that of the pilgrim Squire, is allowed to be completed suggests a potentially receptive audience. Or perhaps the pilgrim Squire will learn, as does Lancelot later in his life, to turn his attention to higher matters, such as God, forsaking the mortal vanities of secular life. Unfortunately, we hear nothing more of the pilgrim Squire in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, but in the following chapters, I focus on the ways in which the bourgeois pilgrims modify and exploit the Arthurian legend, and I turn next to Chaucer the pilgrim’s attempt at his own Arthurian rendering: *The Tale of Thopas*.

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston, 1987), cited parenthetically by book and line number in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Chaucer himself was a squire in the court of Edward III; however, my exploration focuses on Chaucer's presentation of an aristocrat's rendering of the Arthurian legend, rather than attempting to make any biographical connections.

<sup>3</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> All quotations of the French Prose *Lancelot* are from Alexandre Micha, ed., *Lancelot: Romance en prose du XIIIe siècle*, 9 vols. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978-82), cited parenthetically by the division and section of the *Lancelot*, and then, following the semicolon, the volume and page number. The translations are from Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993-96), cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Roberta L. Krueger. "fu cortois plus que chevaliers de laiens. Et par sa cortoisie l'amerent pluisors damoiseles qui ne l'amoient mie tant por sa chevalerie com por sa cortoisie" (LXIX.3; 2.409).

<sup>5</sup> B.J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *Medieval Studies* 9 (1947): 203.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Bethurum, ed., *The Squire's Tale*, by Geoffrey Chaucer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) 33.n.96.

<sup>7</sup> *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan U, 1995) 1-76.

<sup>8</sup> J.R. Osgerby, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *Use of English* 11 (1959): 105.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. Haller, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Uses of Rhetoric," *Modern Philology* 62.4 (May 1965): 289.

<sup>10</sup> Vincent J. DiMarco, Explanatory Notes, *The Squire's Prologue and Tale*, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 893.n.287.

<sup>11</sup> Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Le Chevalier de la Charrette: That Obscure Object of Desire, Lancelot," in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert, *Arthurian Studies* 63 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005) 142.

<sup>12</sup> French quotations and translations from Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre dou Voir Dit (The Book of the True Poem)*, ed. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland, 1998). "Qui tant samerent damour fine / Que leur amour dont ce fu perte / En fu sceue et descouverte" (6411-13).

<sup>13</sup> Quotations of the French Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artus* are from H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 8 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1908-16), cited parenthetically by the volume and page number. This section was translated by Norris J. Lacy. "se il sestoit devant tenu sagement & [si] covertement [que nus ne sen estoit aperceus] il sen garda ore maluaisement [& se maintient si folement] que agravains li freres monsignor Gauvain qui onques ne lavoit ame clerement" (6.205). In fact, Gawain later comments to the maiden of Escalot that Lancelot "is so secretive around everyone at court that no one



knows he is in love” (4.98). “il sest si tos iors celes vers toutes gens que len ne pot savoir que il ama par amors” (6.218).

<sup>14</sup> Karl Heinz Goller, “Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*: The ‘Knotte of the Tale.’” *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposion für Walter F. Schirmer*, ed. Arno Esch (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1969) 163-88. Qtd. in *The Squire’s Tale, A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Donald C. Baker, vol. 2, part 12 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984) 186.n.287.

<sup>15</sup> Osgerby 107.

<sup>16</sup> Elspeth Kennedy also comments on this aspect of Lancelot’s career in “The Figure of Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Graal*,” in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (New York: Routledge, 2002) 85.

<sup>17</sup> This section is translated by Carleton W. Carroll. “s’en vait entre lui et ses escuiers et s’apense qu’il veult aler cheleement en teil maniere que nus nel connoisse com chil qui bee a los et a honor conquerre” (XXIIIa.28; 7.305).

<sup>18</sup> Considering the Squire’s self-alignment with both Lancelot and Gawain, neither of whom fare well in the *Queste del Saint Graal*, I would argue that the Squire is either unfamiliar with this particular text, or ignores it as inappropriate to his youthful worldview which emphasizes martial and amatory prowess over spiritual accomplishments.

<sup>19</sup> Joan Tasker Grimbert notes that the love of Tristan and Iseult is a “fated / fatal love,” one which is beyond their control, as opposed to the “amour chevaleresque” of lovers such as Lancelot and Guinevere, which “inspires prowess that benefits the entire community”. Introduction, *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1995) xxxvii.

<sup>20</sup> See Coolidge Otis Chapman, “Chaucer and the Gawain-Poet: A Conjecture,” *Modern Language Notes* 68.8 (December 1953): 521-524.

<sup>21</sup> Additional references to “fresshe May” can be found in lines 1822, 1859, 1871, 1882, 1886, 1896, 1932, et cetera, of the Merchant’s tale. Joyce E. Peterson also notes these parallel motifs in “The Finished Fragment: A Reassessment of the *Squire’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970): 62-74.

<sup>22</sup> Paull F. Baum, “Notes on Chaucer,” *Modern Language Notes* 32 (1917): 376-377. Qtd. in *The Squire’s Tale, A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Marie Neville, “The Function of *The Squire’s Tale* in the Canterbury Scheme,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 50 (1951): 178.

<sup>24</sup> Neville 177. Peterson also rejects Neville’s interpretation: “The strategy [the pilgrim Squire] chooses appear [*sic*] to be an attempt to correct the Merchant’s picture of courtly love and to dissociate himself from Damyan by redefining the courtly lover” (66).

<sup>25</sup> “Si en fu lancelot trop durement corecies ne mie por ce quil le doutoit . Mais por ce quil lamoit de grant amor” (6.298).

<sup>26</sup> The false tercelet in the *Squire’s Tale* is also described as being “So ravysshed” by his lust for the falcon (5.547).

<sup>27</sup> The Merchant notes that “Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!” (4.1986).

<sup>28</sup> See James Wimsatt's *Chaucer and the French Love Poets* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968) for a more complete discussion on Chaucer's debt to Machaut. Also see Chaucer's *Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues*, ed. and trans. B.A. Windeatt (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> "Ne passa le pont de lespee / Lancelos pour la bien amee / Guenevre • qui estoit royne" (6408-10).

<sup>30</sup> Quotation and translation from Jean Froissart, *L'Espinette amoureuse*, in *An Anthology of Narrative and Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. Kristen M. Figg and R. Barton Palmer (New York: Routledge, 2001) 103-266. "Nennil ains en ont bien livre / A grant martire leur sante" (2316-17).

<sup>31</sup> Stanley J. Kahrl, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Decline of Chivalry," *Chaucer Review* 7.3 (1973): 194-209. Qtd. in *The Squire's Tale, A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Qtd. in Baker 200.n21.

<sup>33</sup> "Mais l'en set par tot, plus a d'un an, que cil Lancelos est mors" (XLIII.12; 2.113).

<sup>34</sup> "cil de son pais le desirent a veoir sor tos homes, kar encore atendent il a ester deliver de la main Claudas par sa proesce. Mais il m'est avis qu'il nel seront mes, puis qu'il est mors" (L.28; 2.239).

<sup>35</sup> "il me dist que c'estoit por Lancelot de Lac qui morz estoit. . . . me parti ier matin dolente et couroucie de la mort au bon chevalier dont touz li mons avra soufraite, car jamais ne sera hom qui ait tel pitié de povre damoisele com il avoit" (LXXV.2; 4.127).

<sup>36</sup> All quotations and translations from Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot, or, The Knight of the Cart (Le Chevalier de la Charrette)*, ed. and trans. William W. Kibler, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series A 1 (New York: Garland, 1981); cited by line number parenthetically in the text. "A po qu'ele ne s'est ocise / maintenant que de Lancelot / la mançonge le la novele ot" (4160-62).

<sup>37</sup> Peterson 69.

<sup>38</sup> "que "au noauz" que je li mant"" (5645).

<sup>39</sup> "Tuit seront esbaï par tans / li deceü, li amuse, / qui an lui gaber ont usé / piece del jor et le la nuit"" (5924-27), and "Lanceloz une de ses teches / li a apprise a cele joste" (5940-41). Another example of Lancelot seeking retaliation for slander occurs elsewhere in Chrétien's *Charrette*; after crossing the sword bridge, Lancelot is subjected to abuse when a strange knight arrives and reveals that Lancelot had condescended to ride in the cart. As his host laments the circumstances that would force anyone to ride in a cart, Lancelot fights the strange knight. For much of the battle, the two are evenly matched; however, Lancelot gains the upper hand when he remembers that the strange knight "had reproached him most basely / For having ridden in the cart" [il li avoit molt vilmant / la charrete mise devant] (2735-36).

<sup>40</sup> John M. Fyler, "Domesticating the Exotic in the *Squire's Tale*," *English Literary History* 55.1 (Spring 1988): 2.

<sup>41</sup> John W. Clark, "Does the Franklin Interrupt the Squire?" *Chaucer Review* 7.2 (1972): 160-1. Peterson 66.

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<sup>42</sup> D.A. Pearsall, "The Squire as Story-Teller," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 34.1 (October 1964): 82-92. Kahrl also notes the Squire's contempt.

<sup>43</sup> Pearsall notes that "The tale is growing, as romances tend to do, almost of their own will, into a monstrous oriental saga, and the Squire is no longer in control" (90).

<sup>44</sup> As John M. Manly and Edith Rickert note, only six manuscripts use the link between the *Squire's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale*; however, as the Ellesmere MS is one of those, I follow other scholars in regarding the Franklin's words to the Squire as intentional (*The Text of the Canterbury Tales, Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols. [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1940] 2.298.).

<sup>45</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Contour."

<sup>46</sup> Chaucer himself held some of the same offices attributed to the Franklin; see Roland Blenner-Hassett, "Autobiographical Aspects of Chaucer's Franklin," *Speculum* 28.4 (October 1953): 791-800.

<sup>47</sup> Clark 160, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Neville 179.

<sup>49</sup> Haller 294.

<sup>50</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Reverence," "Obeisaunce."

<sup>51</sup> Haller echoes this idea when he writes that the Franklin "offers what he presumes is a tribute to the Squire in his own portrait of Aurelius" (294).

<sup>52</sup> Dolores Warwick Frese, "Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the Arthurian Tradition: Thematic Transmission/Aesthetic Transpositions," in *Actes du 14e Congres International Arthurien*, ed. Charles Foulon, et al. (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 1985) 184-207. Calin also suggests that Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* indicates a familiarity with the French Arthuriana of Chrétien and Marie de France (354), and notes that the pilgrim Franklin deals with the same questions of love and fin amor as Chrétien and Gautier d'Arras in their respective stories (350).

<sup>53</sup> Frese 189.

<sup>54</sup> There have been a number of arguments questioning the validity of Aurelius's accomplishment of the deed; for example, Alan T. Gaylord argues that the marriage promise should take precedence over Aurelius's claim in his article "The Promises in *The Franklin's Tale*," *English Literary History* 31.4 (Dec. 1964): 331-65, and others have argued that the removal of the rocks is merely illusion, and therefore Dorigen is under no obligation to acquiesce to his demands.

<sup>55</sup> Neville 179.

<sup>56</sup> Kahrl also takes this view of the pilgrim Squire (203).

<sup>57</sup> Peterson 67.

<sup>58</sup> Peterson 67.

## PART II: ARTHURIAN CREATIONS IN THE CANTERBURY TALES

## CHAPTER 5: CHAUCER'S ARTHURIAN CRITIQUE—

## SIR THOPAS AS ANTI-GAWAIN

The Prioress has just concluded her tale of young Hugh of Lincoln's death at the hand of a wicked Jew,<sup>1</sup> and the company has fallen silent. Sensing the tension in the air, Harry Bailey seeks to lighten the mood, and turning to a slightly plump pilgrim, demands a tale of mirth. Immediately this pilgrim complies, embarking on a daring narrative of fairy queens, giants, and heroic deeds, as a brave yet unknown knight sets out to find an unknown beloved, facing unknown dangers. This is Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the Flemish knight, and as the pilgrims listen to the narrator's tale, they cannot help but notice verbal echoes of folktales and romances, despite their lack of familiarity with Thopas himself. But after the dignified rhyme royal of the Prioress's Tale, the pilgrims find it difficult to concentrate on the narrator's story due to its jarring tail-rhyme, and finally Harry Bailey bursts out, "Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee, / . . . / Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" (7.919-29). At first glance, Chaucer the pilgrim's tail-rhyme seems no different, either in form or in content, from the multitudes of other tail-rhyme romances appearing throughout England during the late fourteenth century. Upon closer examination, however, we find several surface allusions to other Middle English romances, including those of the Arthurian legend.

Beneath the conventional tale of the hero's deeds of love and prowess lies the submerged narrative of Gawain. What looks like an absence in the tale is in fact an encrypted presence, signaled by the tale's mention of two Arthurian characters—Perceval and Guinglain—who never appear without Gawain, as I will discuss below. Furthermore, the tale contains several elements which appear individually in a variety of medieval romances—specifically the appellation “flower of chivalry,” the hero's sex appeal, the encounter with the giant, and the presence of the fairy lover, and I argue that it is the unique combination of all of these in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* which evoke Gawain. Not only does Thopas become the uninspiring signified; the way in which Chaucer's tale invokes while omitting a figure central to Arthurian romance suggests a criticism of the English treatment of the legend.

Laura Hibbard Loomis, Caroline Strong, and others have drawn sharp parallels between Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* and other Middle English romances such as *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Percyvall de Galles*, and *Guy of Warwick*,<sup>2</sup> and the parodic nature of this tale has already been firmly established.<sup>3</sup> I would like take the discussion in a different direction, and focus on the use of the Arthurian legend in this brief tale; specifically, I wish to link Sir Thopas with one of the paragons of Arthurian romance—Sir Gawain. As Keith Busby notes, “it appears to have been impossible to write an Arthurian romance in the Middle Ages without including Gawain,”<sup>4</sup> and at first glance, Chaucer appears to have done just that. Indeed, the only explicit references to the Arthurian legend in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* appear toward the end of the aborted tale, when Chaucer the pilgrim lists “sir Lybeux” among the “romances of

prys,” and compares Sir Thopas to “the knight sire Percyvell” (7.900; 7.897; 7.916). However, I argue that subtle clues are scattered throughout the story of *Sir Thopas* which invite the audience to compare Sir Thopas with Gawain. When we hold Sir Thopas up to Gawain, who appears as the ideal knight in both French and English literature, the former suffers greatly through such an association, for where Gawain succeeds, whether it be in winning the elf queen to dealing with a brusque giant, Thopas meets only with failure. Yet that is not all; if Chaucer merely wanted to mock his Flemish knight, he need not invoke Gawain specifically, for other knights, both within and without the Arthurian world, would easily throw *The Tale of Sir Thopas* into comic relief.

But before I discuss the ways in which Chaucer recalls Gawain in his tale, let me briefly differentiate between Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the author. The pilgrim Chaucer is not intentionally constructing this tale as a critique of Middle English Arthurian romance; as he himself says, he heard this story a long time ago: “‘Hooste,’ quod I, ‘ne beth nat yvele apayd, / For oother tale certes kan I noon, / But of a rym I lerned longe agoon’” (7.707-09). He wants to tell a good story, but such an act is beyond his skill, for when the Host abruptly interrupts, Chaucer the pilgrim protests that “‘it is the beste rym I kan’” (7.928). As Ben Kimpel suggests, the persona which Chaucer the author creates and baptizes with his own name is “humble and rather stupid but well-meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Ann S. Haskell follows a similar interpretation, arguing that the pilgrim Chaucer is merely a puppet of Chaucer the author (and the Host indirectly reinforces this idea when, in line 7.701, he describes Chaucer the

pilgrim as “a popet in an arm”).<sup>6</sup> This pilgrim’s naiveté is perhaps best displayed in the *General Prologue*, when, for instance, he smiles approvingly at the pilgrim Monk’s rejection of Augustinian rule but fails to comprehend the latter’s neglect of his spiritual duties. Chaucer the pilgrim is not intentionally weaving Gawain into his tale; rather, he attempts to construct a quilt from various pieces (and this is made manifest by the vast number of sources for this tale as compared to other stories in *The Canterbury Tales*). However, he does not know where his tale is going, or how it works, for as Thomas Hahn notes, Chaucer the pilgrim has packed so many conventions of medieval romance into this tale that “the story self-destructs.”<sup>7</sup>

#### I. The French Gauvain vs. the English Gawain

When we examine the defining characteristics of Gawain in Middle English romance, we find that Gawain plays a central role in these narratives—he presents a standard by which other knights may compare themselves. Although this function appears in both French and English Arthurian romances, the latter tradition alters Gawain’s role slightly, moving him to the center stage, so to speak. Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas* thus comments on the treatment of Arthur’s nephew at the hands of Middle English romancers by highlighting the difference between the French Gauvain and the Middle English Gawain. Such a shift would be readily apparent to Chaucer’s audience, for as I argue in earlier chapters, Chaucer is well-versed in the French treatments of the Arthurian legend, and as Muscatine and Calin attest, fourteenth-

century England is suffused with French literature, to such an extent that the Arthurian legend is part of the cultural fabric.<sup>8</sup>

Chaucer has a vast array of renowned knights with whom he could pair his hapless Sir Thopas. His choice of Gawain is deliberate for it affords Chaucer the author the chance to critique his fellow romancers' treatment of Arthurian romance.<sup>9</sup> Much has already been written on the tale's parody of the romance genre, ranging from Arthur K. Moore's argument that Chaucer satirizes the fourteenth-century minstrel by creating a narrator who is equally inept at delivering a tale, to T.L. Burton's suggestion that Chaucer mocks the typical description of knightly preparation in medieval romance through the repetitiveness of Sir Thopas's own arming scene.<sup>10</sup> In a different vein, Mary Hamel contends that Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* is a reaction against the seriousness of *The Prioress's Tale*, as Chaucer the pilgrim adopts and transforms the figure of the Virgin Mary into a figure more suited to romance, the elf-queen.<sup>11</sup> Suffice it to say that responses to this tale have been numerous and far-ranging, and considering Chaucer's wide repertoire of genres and narrative voices, it would be difficult (not to mention highly undesirable) to limit this rich tale to only one possible parody. Therefore, I would like to offer an additional target for Chaucer's parody—specifically, the treatment of Gawain at the hands of Middle English romancers. To that end, I turn now to discuss the two Arthurian texts mentioned by Chaucer the pilgrim in his *Tale of Sir Thopas: Sir Perceval of Galles* and *Lybeaus Desconus*. My goal here is to highlight how the English Gawain differs from the French Gauvain.



Many of the Middle English romances derive, either directly or indirectly, from French sources, for as Edward R. Haymes notes, “couplet and tail-rhyme romances were almost certainly composed to meet a demand for romance literature of the French type in English and many of them were [ . . . ] direct translations from the French.”<sup>12</sup> Norris Lacy adds that “even when [Middle English romance writers] were not openly reworking French sources, [ . . . ] their own romances frequently betray a decided Gallic influence in their use of the structures and conventions of romance, their borrowing of popular motifs or characters, or their rhetorical procedures,”<sup>13</sup> and Calin concurs in his study of the French tradition’s impact on medieval English literature. It is not surprising, therefore, that at first glance, Gawain plays a role in Middle English romances such as *Sir Perceval of Galles* or *Ywain and Gawain* which is similar to the corresponding French texts. However, when we compare the French Gauvain with his English manifestation, the differences which arise reveal a failure to fully grasp the purpose of Gawain’s role in the Arthurian narrative on the part of the Middle English romancers.

Gawain is nearly synonymous with the Arthurian legend in England, and French romance certainly does not fail to present Gawain frequently on its pages. Although never the primary protagonist in Chrétien’s romances, Gawain nonetheless features significantly alongside Lancelot in the *Chevalier de la Charrette*, and Perceval in the *Conte du Graal*, as well as in the Prose *Lancelot* and elsewhere. He stands in the background in *Erec et Enide*, counseling Arthur when needed, and jousts against the young hero of *Cligès* so that the audience may have a better sense of the

latter's potential. As William Nitze recognizes, Gawain plays a vital role in the narrative development of these romances, for his wisdom in *Erec*, *Yvain*, and the *Conte du Graal* results in "the recovery of the hero through Gauwain's intervention."<sup>14</sup> But more important, Gawain serves as a gauge to these heroes, as Phillip C. Boardman notes: "Gawain [ . . . ] stands over against the title heroes during the quests, performing parallel actions so that the status of the hero can be measured."<sup>15</sup> That is, throughout a romance such as Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, we are invited to compare the courtly Gawain to Perceval. In the episode containing Perceval's reverie upon the three drops of blood, as Keith Busby notes, "[not only does Percival show] his prowess by defeating Sagremor and Keu, but also his courtesy, here confirmed by a supremely courteous knight."<sup>16</sup> Early in Perceval's career, then, he is equal to Gawain in ability and in manners, and as he continues to develop, he will exceed the paragon of courtesy, for just as Chaucer's Thopas suffers by comparison to Gawain, so too does the latter when placed next to the mature Lancelot or Perceval. Gawain remains static in these stories, and because he already enjoys great prestige as one of Arthur's greatest knights, when we see other knights surpass him in deeds, we are truly impressed by their achievements.

Yet in the Middle English romances, although Gawain plays a conspicuous part, his role has changed. That is, Gawain is no longer the mark to be surpassed; a glass ceiling, if you will, is imposed upon the English manifestations of Perceval and Yvain; in other words, they can reach only to Gawain's level, whereas their French counterparts are measured against and ultimately surpass Gawain's achievements.

For example, in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, Gawain replaces the series of tutors who, in the French *Conte du Graal*, propel Perceval toward his success in the Grail quest. As Calin notes, this romance conflates and reworks Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* and several of the *Perceval Continuations*, thereby "[underscoring] the comic and violent elements, not out of primitiveness but as a conscious literary choice."<sup>17</sup> I agree with Calin's overall assessment of the English tale's relationship to its predecessors; at the same time, however, the changes introduced to Gawain's role in *Sir Perceval of Galles* have a significant impact on the development of Perceval's edification. Although Perceval's education proves deficient both before and after the grail episode in the French version as well as in the English, in the former, there is a greater hint of the innate qualities in the young Perceval which will propel him beyond the achievements of Gawain. The English Perceval, however, is shaped (and thereby limited) by Gawain throughout the romance.

When the naïve Perceval has his initial encounter with knights, it is Gawain who educates him as to the proper terminology: "'We are knyghtis all thre; / With Kyng Arthoure duelle wee'" (310-311). He then directs Perceval to Arthur's court so that he may be made a knight. In Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, however, this lesson is delivered by an anonymous knight. In fact, in the French source, Perceval does not meet Gawain until over four thousand lines into the poem, during the episode in which Perceval is transfixed by the three drops of blood. By this point in Chrétien's version, Perceval has already encountered (and been instructed by) Gornemant,

rescued Blancheflor at Biaurepaire, and failed the test of the Grail Castle. When Gawain and Perceval meet, it is as equals.

In the Middle English version, however, Gawain appears frequently throughout Perceval's early development, and we see him next when Perceval defeats the Red Knight. In Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Perceval is instructed by the squire Yonet on how to strip the body of its armor. The anonymous author of *Sir Perceval of Galles* sees fit to replace this figure, for as Perceval prepares to burn the Red Knight "Out of his iren" (779), Gawain appears:

Than Sir Gawayn doun lyghte,  
Unlacede the Rede Knyghte;  
The childe in his armour dight  
At his awnn will. (785-88)

Although Perceval does encounter his uncles (who, although unnamed in the Middle English, correspond to Gornemant and the Hermit of the *Conte du Graal*), he does not receive any sort of instruction—either in chivalry or piety—from them; they serve only to convey information about the siege upon Lady Lufamour (the English equivalent of Blancheflor). Thus the Middle English Perceval sets out to relieve Lady Lufamour from the Sowdane (who corresponds to the French Clamadeu) without any proper training in knightly deeds—and yet succeeds magnificently. As the narrator exclaims, "Yitt was ther more ferly: / Ther was no qwyk man left therby!" (1217-18).

Gawain next appears when King Arthur, having heard of Lady Lufamour's plight, arrives to assist her. Unbeknownst to them, however, Perceval has already

defeated the Sowdane's men, and now rides out to challenge the newcomers. In a scene evocative of Chrétien's *Cligès*, Gawain must ride against Perceval; although the former recognizes the armor, he carries on lest the person within is a different knight. When the fight ends in a stalemate and a joyful recognition scene ensues, we know that Perceval is clearly Gawain's equal in prowess. However, in the French version, Perceval attains Gawain's level much earlier, for when the two meet, approximately 4400 lines of the 9184 lines have elapsed. The Middle English version, which has a total of 2288 lines, marks the two as equals near line 1523, when two-thirds of the story has been told.

In the French source, soon after Perceval meets with Gawain, his failure at the Grail Castle is publicly announced, and he flees shamefully to the woods. It is here where, after much repentance, Chrétien's narrative will end as Perceval seeks spiritual guidance from the Hermit. However, the Middle English romancer is not interested in allowing his hero to grow beyond Gawain. Now that Gawain is back on the scene, he is afforded the opportunity to watch his pupil in action as the latter fights the Sowdane. However, because he lacks proper training in knighthood, once he knocks the latter to the ground, he does not know what to do:

And to the erthe he hym helde  
 With his speres ende.  
 Fayne wolde he hafe hym slayne,  
 This uncely Sowdane,  
 Bot gate couthe he get nane,

So ill was he kende. (1671-76)

This scene has a counterpart in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* when Perceval knocks the seneschal Anguingueron from his horse. Like his English counterpart, "the youth, not knowing how to deal / with him from horseback, dismounted" (2190-91).<sup>18</sup> However, this Perceval has received training from Gornemant, and thus is able to think on his feet and adapt to the situation. When the defeated Anguingueron begs for mercy, Perceval hesitates for just a moment:

But then he remembered  
the gentleman who had taught him  
never to kill a knight outright once he had defeated  
and gotten the best of him. (2204-08)<sup>19</sup>

In the Middle English, Perceval has no such guidance to recall; therefore, Gawain must step forward to instruct Perceval in the next step: "And thou woldes of thi stede lighte, / Wynn hym one were" (1686-87). Although Perceval thus learns to fight his opponent on equal terms, ultimately winning the fight, what follows in the Middle English tale is more of the same. After marrying Lady Lufamour, Perceval sets out to find his mother and participates in several fights along the way. This last encounter with Gawain is the culmination of his training; there are no hermits, and no Grail. The conclusion of the tale contains a possible allusion to Chrétien's Grail story, for at the end of his life, Perceval "went into the Holy Londe" (2281), but whereas the Grail knight typically heals, all that the Middle English Perceval knows to do is fight for in

the Holy Land, he “Wanne many cites full stronge, / And there was he slayne, I undirstonde” (2282-83). He dies as he lives, with sword in hand.

Thus Gawain’s role in *Sir Perceval of Galles* is very superficial. Perceval’s education is limited to the proper arrangement of arms and battlefield procedures when Gawain is his sole instructor. In other words, Gawain shapes the young knight, providing him with the bare military essentials, but as the sole provider of instruction in the English romance, Gawain effectively (albeit unintentionally) clips the hero’s wings. *Lybeaus Desconus*, that other Arthurian romance mentioned by Chaucer the pilgrim, follows a similar pattern. When Guinglain leaves Arthur’s court to rescue the Lady of Synadoun, Gawain himself arms the hero: “Syr Gawyn, his owe syre, / Henge abo[u]te his swyre / A shelde with one chefferon” (252-54), whereas in *Le Bel Inconnu*, Guinglain arms himself. Although Gawain does order Guinglain’s arms to be brought in, and gives the latter a squire to accompany him, he does not assist in the actual arming, unlike the Middle English version.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, attention frequently is drawn to the fact that Guinglain is Gawain’s son. Any time that his relationship to Gawain is mentioned in *Le Bel Inconnu*, the word “pere” is used; for example, the Maiden of the White Hands informs Guinglain that ““Gawain is your father”” (3236).<sup>21</sup> However, the relationship is described differently in the Middle English. For example, Sir Lamberd, having been defeated by Guinglain, declares that ““Thowe arte of Sir Gawynes kynne”” (1708), and the Lady of Synadon echoes this language, explaining that she would be enchanted ““Tyll [I] had kissed Gaweyne, / That is doughty knight, certayne, / Or some of his kynde” (2106-08). In both examples,

either “kynne” or “kynde” appears. The most obvious meaning behind these words is that Guinglain is a relation of Gawain—hence the modern English “kin.” However, another meaning is possible—that Guinglain is a “kind” of Gawain. In other words, the Middle English Guinglain cannot surpass his father because he is identical to him. Perhaps this is the reason why the Middle English romancer omits Guinglain’s love affair with Blanchemains, the Maiden of the White Hands. That is, Gawain does not ever truly love; as Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby note, “his understanding of the mutual relationship between knighthood and love [ . . . ] is deficient.”<sup>22</sup> Because Guinglain is a product of his father, he cannot suffer the agonies of love which encompass his French counterpart.

Thus, although Gawain remains a conspicuous part of the Middle English romances, his role has changed. As Busby notes, in French Arthurian romance, “Gauvain goes round in circles, forever coming up against obstacles, and never seeming to make any real progress.”<sup>23</sup> Although the Middle English romancers (with the exception of the *Sir Gawain* poet) continue this tendency of Gawain’s, they extend his circle of influence to restrict the heroes with whom Gawain interacts. He no longer serves as a measure against which to compare knights such as Guinglain or Perceval; instead, he becomes the goal. This is similar to Gawain’s appearance in the French tradition; Gawain is the ideal knight. However, whereas the French tradition allows its heroes to meet and surpass Gawain, the Middle English tradition allows a limited development of its protagonists. No one surpasses the English manifestation of Gawain.



But what happens, as in the case of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, when Gawain is absent? The knight truly becomes errant, for he has no goal towards which to move, no paragon of knightly prowess to imitate. It is no surprise, then, that Thopas does nothing; even Chaucer's verb choices reflect this inactivity, for within the first forty lines of the tale, Thopas performs only one action. That is, the majority of the verbs associated with Thopas are forms of the verb "to be" and merely rename their subject: "Yborn he was"; "His fader was a man ful free"; "he was a good archeer", "he was chaast" (7.718, 7.721, 7.739, 7.745). A slight variation occurs with "He koude hunte at wilde deer, / And ride an haukyng for river" (7.736-37), but even here the voice is subjunctive rather than indicative; in other words, there is the possibility that Thopas is capable of these things, but he is not actively doing them. When he finally does act, he does so without purpose, for "so bifel upon a day, / . . . / Sire Thopas wold out ride" (7.748-50). No destination is given, for Thopas is going nowhere. In fact, as others have noted, the tale is structured in such a way that it dwindles away as the fits become successively smaller in length. Therefore, we find only the hint of Gawain, but he is not directly mentioned because the Middle English romancers have reduced (and nearly eliminated) his conventional function by preventing their knightly creations from surpassing him.

## II. Gawain's Popularity

There is no explicit mention of Gawain in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, unlike the *Squire's Tale*, and at first glance, it is difficult to classify *The Tale of Sir Thopas* as an Arthurian romance considering that of the six “romances of prys” listed at the end, only one (*Lybeaus Desconus*) is overtly Arthurian. Unlike the Wife of Bath's Arthurian romance, at no point is there reference to King Arthur in *Sir Thopas*:

Men speken of romances of prys,  
Of Horn child and of Ypotys,  
Of Beves and sir Gy,  
Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour . . . (7.897-900)

Yet the only person to whom Thopas is compared directly is an Arthurian character, Percival, when Chaucer notes that Thopas “drank water of the well, / As dide the knyghte sire Percyvell” (7.915-16), alluding to the fourteenth-century English *Sir Perceval of Galles*.<sup>24</sup> Thus the Arthurian world has been invoked by the end of the tale (and before the Host's abrupt interruption). Audiences familiar with Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* would quickly associate Gawain with Percival, as nearly equal time is devoted to the adventures of the former as to the latter. If Chaucer were indeed familiar with *Sir Launfal*, then he would have also found Perceval and Gawain linked, for when Launfal is accused of insulting the Queen, “Syr Percevall and Syr Gawayn, / They wer hys borwes [sureties]” (814-15).<sup>25</sup> Likewise, in *Lybeaus Desconus*, when a maid arrives at Arthur's court to seek aid for her mistress, the Lady of Synadoun, she specifically requests “Syr Persyfale and Syr Gawyn, / That ben abled in torment”

(188-189). As Busby shows, Gawain is ubiquitous in Arthurian romance, whether as a character, or as a benchmark for knightly perfection.

Although few Arthurian romances were being written in England in the fourteenth century, evidence suggests that Arthurian material was consumed avidly, for as Derek Pearsall notes, in “lists of books owned by the aristocracy in the fourteenth century we find that they consist principally of books in French, [and] most are Arthurian romances.”<sup>26</sup> The anonymous author of the thirteenth-century *Chevalier à l’Epée* faults Chrétien for his failure to write a story focused solely on Gawain, further indicating Gawain’s popularity.<sup>27</sup> As suggested by Chaucer’s brief allusions throughout the *Canterbury Tales* and the dream visions, a fourteenth-century English audience, consisting of members from all three major estates, would be familiar with the legend. I would argue, therefore, that such an audience would have Gawain in mind as Chaucer the pilgrim unfolds his tale due to a number of Thopas’s defining characteristics. Before I discuss these pivotal traits, however, I will discuss Gawain’s reputation in fourteenth-century England.

The one-to-six ratio of Arthurian to non-Arthurian titles in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is most likely indicative of the larger ratio of texts overall, for as Phillip C. Boardman notes, of the extant Middle English romances, numbering approximately 120, only about thirty are Arthurian.<sup>28</sup> When we compare Chaucer’s catalogue of heroes to those found in other Middle English romances, a notable gap appears. That is, in the *Cursor Mundi*, the *Laud Troy Book*, *Richard Coeur de Lion*, *Sir Launfal*, and *The Squire of Low Degree*, for example, one character is consistently listed:

Gawain. Chaucer's audience would expect to find some reference to Arthur's nephew among the "romances of prys." Gawain is so ubiquitous in these catalogues that he appears even when they are composed of both Arthurian and non-Arthurian characters. In the fifteenth-century *Squire of Low Degree*, for example, the protagonist laments that he lacks the abilities of more valiant knights:

Or els so bolde in eche fight  
As was Syr Lybius that gentell knyght,  
Or els so bolde in chivalry  
As Syr Gawayne, or Syr Guy. (77-80)<sup>29</sup>

Here, Gawain appears alongside Guy and Guinglain, two of the knights included in Chaucer's catalogue. In *Richard Coeur de Lion*, which exists in the Auchinleck Manuscript,<sup>30</sup> Gawain also is placed next to epic heroes such as Roland and Alexander the Great:

Of Rouland & of Oliuer  
& of þe oþer dusseper,  
Of Alisander & Charlmeyn  
& Ector þe gret werrer  
& of Danys le fiz Oger,  
Of Arthour & of Gaweyn. (13-18)<sup>31</sup>

As Pearsall notes, "Arthurian romance has Arthur's court as its background or point of reference, but it is not about Arthur."<sup>32</sup> That is, while the early chronicle tradition tends to focus on an active King Arthur, in the romance tradition, the focus shifts

away from Arthur to land on the various knights milling about his court. In the romances of Chrétien, for example, Arthur fulfills a central role; the adventures often begin and end in his court. However, he rarely, if ever, takes part in the action. The primary figure who replaces Arthur as the center of Arthurian romance is Gawain. As Hahn notes, Gawain operates “as an anchor securing sundry heroes and adventures to Arthurian contexts” and that he “plays a *role*; he routinely facilitates the extravagant adventures that happen around him, and does so to such an extent that one might even think of him almost as a narrative function.”<sup>33</sup> It is no surprise that Gawain appears in every Middle English Arthurian romance, and serves as the protagonist in a large number of narratives, including *The Avowying of Arthur*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and one of the most refined Middle English romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>34</sup>

Even if his name does not appear in the title of the story, Gawain is still ever present on the pages of the work. In fact, Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington speculate that “to help the popularity of the work [*Ywain and Gawain*] [the anonymous author attached] to it the name of Sir Gawain, an especial favourite of the northern English romancers.”<sup>35</sup> W.R.J. Barron also attests to Gawain’s popularity in medieval England, noting “that English audiences preferred Gawain to Lancelot.”<sup>36</sup> But what is it about this character that makes him so intriguing to English audiences? What sets Gawain apart from the myriad of other valiant knights adorning the halls of medieval chivalry?

### III. Invoking Gawain

In *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the hero knight wanders aimlessly through the countryside, and when he stops to rest in a green meadow, we are told that he “dremed al this nyght, pardee, / An elf-queene shal my lemman be” (7.787-88). As Lee Patterson notes, it is rare to fall in love with a fairy lover in a dream,<sup>37</sup> and as Laura Hibbard Loomis observes, only two other Middle English romances deal with female fairy love: *Sir Launfal* and *Thomas of Erceldoune*.<sup>38</sup> In the first, Launfal has left Arthur’s court due to his poverty, and having retreated to the solitude of the forest, settles beneath a tree to rest. At that moment, two maidens approach the sorrowful Launfal in order to summon him to the fairy queen’s presence: “‘Our lady, Dame Tryamour, / Bad thou schuldest com speke with here’” (255-56). When Launfal enters the lady’s pavilion, the narrator makes her Otherworldly nature explicit, for we are told that “Her fadyr was Kyng of Fayrye, / Of Occient, fer and nyghe” (280-81). A similar scene appears in *Thomas of Erceldoune*, for as Thomas lays under an apple tree in the month of May, he witnesses a beautiful woman riding by. Entranced, he leaps to his feet and chases after her, and when she allows him to catch up to her, she reveals that she is a queen “of ane oper countree” (Thomas has mistaken her for the Queen of Heaven) and personally leads him into her land.<sup>39</sup>

In both of the romances discussed above, the fairy woman seeks out the knight in order to reward his deeds with her love. Furthermore, neither Thomas nor Launfal

has any intention of seeking the elf-queen when they leave their home courts. Yet in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, it is the knight who quests after the lady—simply because of a dream—and he stumbles upon Fairyland by accident—destiny is not involved. Whether or not Chaucer knew either *Thomas of Erceldoune* or *Sir Launfal*, we cannot know, despite the extensive source work undertaken by previous scholars regarding the many verbal echoes and parallel motifs. Laura Hibbard Loomis makes the compelling point that the Manuscript Cotton Caligula A II includes *Libeaus*, *Ypotis*, and the unique text of *Launfal*, so if this is the manuscript in which Chaucer read *Lybeaus Desconus* (rather than the Auchinleck MS), it is possible that he was exposed to *Sir Launfal* as well.<sup>40</sup> But at the same time, there remains an Arthurian character, Gawain, who is also linked with a fairy mistress, a detail made evident by Chaucer's own *Squire's Tale*. In the following sections, therefore, I argue that Chaucer the author deliberately invokes Gawain in order to contrast him with Sir Thopas.

#### IV. Gawain's Defining Traits

We have seen that Gawain is known first and foremost for his courtesy, as both French and Middle English romances attest.<sup>41</sup> For example, in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, as Lady Lufamour watches Perceval defend her castle against the Sarazen, she summons her chamberlain, who is said to have "The curtasye of Wawayne" (1262), words echoes when Chaucer's pilgrim Squire invokes "Gawayn, with his olde

curteisye” (5.95). In the French tradition, Gawain is always foremost, but never best, for as Martin Gosman notes, due to his courtesy, Gawain is “the incarnation of the ideal knight, and every young man who presents himself at the court will attempt to attain Gawain’s level of knighthood and courtliness. Arthur’s nephew is the touchstone with which the behavior of others is assessed.”<sup>42</sup> This idea manifests itself in Chrétien’s romances, where his various heroes—Lancelot, Yvain, and Perceval—outshine Gawain by the narrative’s conclusion.

Although Gawain’s reputation suffers during the Grail Quest in the French tradition (and Sir Thomas Malory will continue this pejoration in the fifteenth-century *Morte d’Arthur*), he frequently is awarded the appellation “the flower of chivalry.” For example, in the thirteenth-century *L’Âtre Périlleux*, he is “la flor de chevalerie,”<sup>43</sup> and in the fifteenth-century *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, Arthur tells his premier knight (who has just agreed to marry the loathly lady) that ““Of alle knyghtes thou berest the flower / That evere yet I fond” (373-74).<sup>44</sup> Thus the ears of an Arthurian-minded audience might perk up when Chaucer says of Sir Thopas that he “bereth the flour / Of roial chivalry” (7.901-02). However, this detail alone does not entirely evoke Gawain, for as Laura Hibbard Loomis notes, as the number of Middle English romances increased, so too did the use of this phrase, to the extent that it became hackneyed.<sup>45</sup> In fact, this term is often used to describe the entirety of Arthur’s court, as in *Ywain and Gawain*: “And of his curtayse company; / Thare was the flower of chevallry” (43-45).<sup>46</sup> This phrase is clearly not unknown to Chaucer,



for in his *Knight's Tale*, Theseus has “in his host of chivalrye the flour” (1.124).

However, there are other traits which bring Gawain to mind.

Another defining characteristic of Gawain, therefore, is his attractiveness to women, and as a result of his prowess and courtesy, he is continuously sought after by the opposite sex, both for love and for aid. As Whiting notes, “Women expect [Gawain] to make love to them and [ . . . ] become doubtful of his identity if he fails to make an amorous gesture.”<sup>47</sup> We find an example of this in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, when Bertilak's wife makes advances towards Gawain, for she doubts his identity, telling him, ““I haf seten by yourself here sere twyes, / 3et herde I neuer of your hed helde no wordez / Þat euer longed to luf, lasse no more”” (1522-24). A similar episode appears in the *Perlesvaus*, when Gawain prefers sleep to amorous adventures. In *Ywain and Gawain*, when Ywain comes across the imprisoned Lunet, he expresses his surprise that Gawain has not succored her: ““Whare was Syr Gawayn? / He has bene ever trew and lele, / He fayled never no damysele”” (2178-79). Lunet explains that Gawain's absence at court is due to another woman; that is, he is in pursuit of Meleagant, who has abducted Queen Guinevere.<sup>48</sup>

But it is not merely Gawain's physical presence that causes women to swoon, for Whiting continues, “Because of Gawain's reputation as a lover he is the secret passion of many maidens who have never seen him in the flesh.”<sup>49</sup> For example, in the Prose *Lancelot*, when Gawain is imprisoned and tortured by Caradoc, he is aided by a young woman who explains the motivation for her assistance: ““The great help that you have always given to ladies and damsels has won you my love”” (2.289).<sup>50</sup>

This is their first meeting. In fact, many women throughout Arthurian romance determine to take no lover unless he be Gawain, as is the case in *Le Chevalier aux deux Epées*. Sir Thopas appears to have a similar reputation, for we are told that “Ful many a mayde, bright in bour, / They moorn for hym paramour, / When hem were bet to slepe” (7.742-44).

According to Laura Hibbard Loomis, however, “Chaucer seems to have recalled, chiefly from *Guy of Warwick*, the hero’s irresistible charm for lovelorn, sleepless ladies,”<sup>51</sup> and cites the following lines as evidence:

þat day Gij dede his mist  
 To serue þritti maidens brizt.  
 Al anamourd on him þai were  
 & loued Gij for his feir chere. (105-08)<sup>52</sup>

Loomis also suggests *Ipomadon* as a source for Thopas’s sleepless admirers, for here we find that the “eyre [heir] of Calabre,” upon meeting Ipomadon, “lay but she slept noght, / For of the squyere she had grete thoght” (349-50).<sup>53</sup> Although there are verbal echoes between the cited passages and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, both the enamored maidens and the sleepless nights are commonplaces in medieval romance, so it is difficult to argue the precedence of one source over another. Suffice it to say, however, that in *Guy of Warwick*, the hero has already devoted himself to Felice, a mortal woman, for “Al anoper it was his pouzt” (110), and Ipomadon has come to the court of Calabre specifically to pursue the princess, having fallen in love with her through only reports. Thopas, however, has no agenda at the moment when we learn

of his effect on the women of his realm, for he wanders aimlessly through the countryside before he sets his sights on the elf queen.

Gawain's sex appeal might tempt us to prefer Loomis's identification of Thopas with Guy of Warwick rather than Gawain. After all, when we consider the number of women seduced by Gawain throughout his long textual history, he and Thopas seem to be worlds apart, particularly when we consider that Chaucer the pilgrim explicitly states that Thopas is "chaast and no lechour" (7.745). Yet what do these terms mean, and do they necessarily distance Gawain from Thopas? According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, a "lechour" can be an adulterer or a fornicator,<sup>54</sup> and "chaast" typically refers to one who is "virginal, abstinent, continent, chaste."<sup>55</sup> Although as B.J. Whiting notes, Gawain does not pursue married women (and Gawain's rejection of the amorous lady in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* serves to confirm this), several romances in both the French and the English traditions provide ample evidence of Gawain seducing unmarried females.<sup>56</sup> Although the Grail romances frequently vilify Gawain, exaggerating the flaws already present in earlier traditions, outside of these narratives, he is considered a paragon of virtue, a model to emulate and surpass. Furthermore, W.R.J. Barron suggests "that the Grail made little appeal to [English audiences],"<sup>57</sup> possibly due to the Grail story's treatment of Gawain. Although he typically remains unmarried, when Gawain is joined with a woman, as in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, he is faithful for as long as the marriage lasts:

In alle his lyfe he lovyd none so welle,

.....

As a coward he lay by her bothe day and nyghte.

Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte. (806-09)

If we turn to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a story which B.J. Whiting and Coolidge Otis Chapman believe was familiar to Chaucer,<sup>58</sup> Gawain is described as “Voyded of vche vylany, with vertuez ennoured in mote,” and “His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer” (635, 653). Therefore, whereas a medieval French audience might recall an amorous Gawain, a medieval English audience would not dismiss Gawain from their minds when they are told that Sir Thopas is “chaast and no lechour” (7.745).

Of course, all of the aforementioned traits can easily be assigned to several of the various medieval heroes with whom Chaucer might have been familiar. It is the accumulation of these particular traits in the character of Sir Thopas, I argue, that recalls Gawain. But most importantly, there is the strange matter of the fairy mistress which links Thopas most firmly to Gawain. As I discuss above, there are other significant connections dealing with a fairy queen, but no situations which parallel that of Sir Thopas as clearly as that of Gawain. That is, although a fairy lover is present, male heroes such as Launfal lack another vital trait which links Gawain and Thopas, namely the reputation as a lover and the resultant effect on these heroes on surrounding women.

For example, at the conclusion of *Sir Launfal*, the hero leaves Arthur’s court forever with his beloved fairy queen: “Thus Launfal, wythouten fable, / . . . / Was

take ynto Fayrye; / Seththe saw hym yn thys lond noman” (1033-35). However, Launfal lacks Gawain’s reputation as a lover; although he encounters “Ladies that wer well bryght yn bour” at Arthur’s court and is victorious in the joust, no woman (aside from Dame Tryamour, of course) sighs for him (629). Guinevere’s interest in him shifts from outright hostility—prior to Launfal’s first meeting with the fairy queen, Guinevere dislikes Launfal to such an extent that “sche wold wyth all her might / That he hadde be bothe day and nyght / In paynys mor and more” (178-80), but no explicit reason is given as to why—to amorous obsession. Seeing him leading the dance, Guinevere exclaims, “Y love hym as my lyf!” (654), but although she loses sleep over Launfal’s indifference—“anon sche ley doun yn her bedde. / For wrethe, syk sche hyr bredde” (703-04), his rejection prompts her to accuse Launfal of improper behavior, thereby signaling her own lack of worth.<sup>59</sup> In other words, Guinevere is in no way comparable to the numerous maids, “bright in bour” (7.742), who pine over Sir Thopas.

Although there are many verbal echoes between *Sir Launfal* and Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, we can never know for sure that Chaucer was familiar with the former story. However, if we turn to Chaucer’s own words, we can better determine what his intentions are regarding the fairy mistress. For example, Chaucer the pilgrim specifically mentions the text of “sir Lybeux” (7.900); this is the story of “The Fair Unknown,” or Guinglain, the son of Gawain. Chaucer does not intend his audience to identify his wandering knight with Guinglain, however, for as his language indicates, Thopas is more accomplished than the Fair Unknown. After

listing the heroes of the “romances of prys,” Chaucer the pilgrim uses the conjunction “but” to indicate that Thopas excels beyond all aforementioned knights (7.901).

However, the mention of Guinglain would immediately evoke Gawain. *Lybeaus Desconus* makes the relationship between Gawain and Guinglain explicit from the moment that the Fair Unknown is introduced in the story, for his lineage is given immediately after his name: “His name was Sir Gyngelayne, / Gotten he was of Sir Gaweyne / Vnder a forest syde” (7-9).<sup>60</sup>

Although the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus* does not indicate the Otherworldly origin of Guinglain’s mother, it is likely that Chaucer would have been aware of this background. Whiting notes that it was well established that “Gawain’s original mistress was a fairy, queen of the other world, and nameless,”<sup>61</sup> and that he has had connections with the Otherworld throughout his life for “[a] fairy at Gawain’s birth promises him beauty, courtesy and honorable estate.”<sup>62</sup> For example, the thirteenth-century French romance *L’Âtre Périlleux* indicates Gauvain’s mother was a fairy, and in Renaut de Bâgé’s *Le Bel Inconnu*, when the Fair Unknown wins the Adventure of the Perilous Kiss and frees the lady, she reveals his identity: ““and I shall also tell you who your mother is: / you are the son of Blanchemal the Fay”” (3236-37).<sup>63</sup> This knowledge is made public when Blonde Esmeree arrives at Arthur’s court and announces Guinglain’s lineage, and it is at this point that Gawain himself confirms his relationship with his fairy mistress: “Gawain rejoiced to hear this, / for he knew at once that Guinglain was his son / and that he had loved the fay” (5234-36).<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps more important is the fact that Chaucer the poet has already established his knowledge of Fairyland's association with the Arthurian legend, and specifically with Gawain, when the pilgrim Squire draws a favorable comparison between Gawain and the strange knight who enters the hall of Cambyuskan. Furthermore, the majority of variations of "fairy" or "elf" which appear throughout Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* occur in contexts which help to affirm my identification of Sir Thopas with Gawain. For example, although "elves" appears in a negative context in *The Miller's Tale*,<sup>65</sup> and "elf" in *The Man of Law's Tale*,<sup>66</sup> the remainder of these "elvish" mentions occur either within *The Tale of Sir Thopas* (Thopas mentions four times that he seeks an "elf-queene" in 7.788, 7.790, 7.795, and 7.799), or within the only explicitly Arthurian tale, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. In the latter tale, "elf" or its variations appear three times, and these references serve not to establish elves as malicious creatures, as the usage in *The Miller's Tale* or *The Man of Law's Tale* might suggest, but rather to establish their typical haunts and to explain their absence from the forests of Chaucer's times. For example, the opening lines of this tale informs us that "The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede" (3.860-61), and "For ther as wont to walken was an elf / Ther walketh now the lymytour Himself" (3.873-74).

Chaucer's use of the word "fairye" and its variations within *The Canterbury Tales* reveals a similar pattern. Four instances of "fayerye" appear in *The Merchant's Tale*, as the narrator places the classical gods Pluto and Proserpine in the realm of the Otherworld rather than their typical underworld haunt of Hades when he introduces

“Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye” (4.2227). The pilgrim Merchant also uses “fayerye” to describe May at her wedding, where “Hire to biholde it semed fayerye” (4.1743). Considering the Merchant’s negative view of women (due, as he admits, to his own marriage, which has resulted in “Wepying and waylyng, care and oother sorwe” [4.1213]), like the Miller and the Man of Law, Fairyland seems to be laden with negative overtones, for its inhabitants bring sorrow to mortals. However, in both of these texts, these insinuations are placed in the mouths of questionable characters within the tales; Donegild, for example, in *The Man of Law’s Tale* “traitour was to hire ligeance” (2.895), and John the Carpenter has little education in *The Miller’s Tale*, believing that “Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee” (1.3454). Both *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Merchant’s Tale* fall into the genre of fabliaux, whereas the well-meaning pilgrim Chaucer intends for his *Tale of Sir Thopas* to be a romance, in the same vein as the Arthurian *Wife of Bath’s Tale*.

Therefore, when we look at the remaining mentions of “fairy” and its forms which appear in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, *The Squire’s Tale*, and the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, we find positive connotations. Although the brass horse presented to Cambyuskan is believed to be “a fairye” (5.201) in *The Squire’s Tale*, the people view it with wonder rather than fear. In addition, that paragon of courtesy, Gawain, now resides comfortably in Fairyland. The Wife of Bath makes it clear that a land full of fairies is far preferable to one filled with friars:

Wommen may go saufly up and down.

In every bussh or under every tree



Ther is noon oother incubus but he [the friar],

And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (3.878-81)

Thus *The Tale of Sir Thopas* shares its fairy connection with the two tales that are either explicitly Arthurian—*The Wife of Bath's Tale*—or that mentions Arthurian characters—*The Squire's Tale*. In addition, both narrators of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* uses “elf” and “fairy” interchangeably, for although Thopas seeks an elf-queen, he knows that he must seek “The contree of Fairye” (7.802).

Therefore, when Chaucer the pilgrim naively launches upon his tale, those among the pilgrims, along with Chaucer the author, who are well versed in Arthuriana would hear these subtle echoes of Gawain embedded in the *Tale of Sir Thopas*. But to what end? In the next section, I explore the ways in which the character of Thopas diverges from that of Gawain, much to the former's detriment, beginning with the way in which each character behaves when they come across that staple of medieval romance, the giant.

## V. Sir Thopas versus Sir Gawain—The Encounter with the Giant

At first glance, the giant which Thopas encounters during his search for the elf queen appears to be the typical monster of medieval romance: “Til that ther cam a greet geaunt, / His name was sire Olifaunt, / A perilous man of dede” (7.807-09). As Laura Hibbard Loomis has noted, a similar giant appears in one of the “romances of

prys” which Chaucer the pilgrim lists at the end of his tale: *Lybeaus Desconus*.<sup>67</sup> In this story, the giant haunting the Il d’Or warns Guinglain, like the character of Thopas, to turn back: ““Torne home ayene tite, / For thyne owne prophite, / Yf thou lovyst thy prowte”” (1344-46). When Guinglain refuses to do so, the giant “levyd on Turmagaunte” and kills Guinglain’s horse (1363).<sup>68</sup> Compare this to the warning given by Chaucer’s giant to Thopas: “He seyde, ‘Child, by Termagaunt, / But if thou prike out of myn haunt, / Anon I sle thy steede”” (7.810-12). In both tales, we find parallel warnings, accompanied by the oath “by Termagaunt” and threatened (or actual, as in the case of *Lybeaus*) danger to the knight’s steed.

However, significant differences exist between *Lybeaus* and *Sir Thopas* as regards the giant episode. Specifically, in Chaucer’s tale, the appearance of the giant is not particularly monstrous, and the elf queen is not in danger. Earlier in the text of *Lybeaus Desconus*, while the hero makes his way to succor the Lady of Synadoun, the accompanying maiden’s dwarf sees a fire in the distance. As the group draws nearer, they find two giants who are described as monstrous in appearance; one is “rede and lothelych, / That oper black as eny pyche” (604-05). Later, the giant Maugys, who is besieging the castle of Yle d’Or, is described in similar terms: “He is as blacke as pyche” (1299).<sup>69</sup> In *Guy of Warwick*, another major source of Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the giant which the hero encounters is also hideous to behold:

Michel and griselich was that gome

With ani god man to duelle.

He is so michel and unread

Of his sight a man may drede  
 With tong as Y thee telle;  
 As blac he is as brodes brend,  
 He semes as it were a fende  
 That comen were out of helle. (737-44)<sup>70</sup>

Chaucer's giant, on the other hand, is described only as "greet" and "A perilous man of dede" (7.807, 7.809). There is no indication that he is monstrous in appearance, only that he is large in size. After all, the word "geaunt" can simply refer to a "man of extraordinary size or strength."<sup>71</sup> What further supports this reading of Olifaunt as a large man is the fact that, unlike the giants of *Lybeaus* and *Guy*, he is granted a title: "sire Olifaunt" (7.808). Although "sire" can be used contemptuously (and Harry Bailey's address to the Nun's Priest is often viewed in this respect), typically it is "applied to one of the order of knighthood."<sup>72</sup> These subtle differences suggest that Chaucer the author is purposefully deviating from the traditional giant trope of medieval romance.

In the typical Middle English romance, such loathly giants are often accompanied by damsels in distress. In *Lybeaus*, although the hero has not set out from Arthur's court specifically to rescue either of these maidens, once he learns of their plights, he is quick to come to their aid. For example, the maiden trapped by the red and black giants begins crying loudly once Guinglain comes into view of the giants: "'Wayle-a-waye! / . . . / Helppe me, Mary mylde, / For love of thine childe, / That J [sic] be nought for-yett!'" (616-21). Later in the text, we are told that the Lady

of the Il d'Or is under siege by the giant Maugys: "Her haþ be-leyde abowte" (1248), and once the hero has slain the giant, the Lady "thanked hym with honour / That he was hir socoure / Agayne that gigante file" (1464-66). In both of these situations, the hero is made explicitly aware of the danger posed by the giants to these women. Indeed, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen directs his attention to the sexual monstrosity typically represented by these figures, commenting on *Sir Thopas* that "Olifaunt has abducted the elf-queen and holds her in his lair [which] suggest[s] that he is the traditional giant of romance, intent on demonstrating his lack of somatic [110] control on his unwilling 'lemman.'" <sup>73</sup>

Yet no indication is given that the elf-queen of Chaucer's tale is in need of rescue. She has not been abducted from her homeland, for Thopas has entered the "contree of Fairye" (7.802), and when he sets out on his quest, he makes it clear that he does not intend rescue, for he seeks only to "t'espye" (7.800). Although Sir Olifaunt, a "greet geaunt," haunts her surroundings, he does not appear to be her captor or her persecutor. When he speaks to Thopas, he offers no threat to the person of the elf-queen, which is contrary to what typically occurs in medieval romances, regardless of the language. In *Ywain and Gawain*, for example, the main character finds lodging at a castle whose inhabitants continuously shift from joy to sorry. When he inquires as to the reason for their shifts in mood, he is told that "A geant wons here-nere-bysyde, / Pat es a devil of mekil pride; / His name hat Harpyns of Mowtain" (2249-51); this same giant has laid waste to the surrounding lands and now demands the lord's daughter so that he might defile her body. <sup>74</sup> However, in

Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, there is no cry for help; no one comes to the main court seeking a champion, and Thopas encounters no one on his journey who requests his aid. Although Sir Olifaunt threatens Thopas with violence if he does not depart the land of faery, there is no indication that the giant has laid siege to either the land or the faery queen's residence. When he returns to town, he boasts of his upcoming fight; however, he makes no mention of a damsel in distress. Instead, he plans to fight "For paramour and jolitee / Of oon that shoon ful brighte" (7.843-44). There is nothing at stake (aside from his own life) should he fail to defeat Sir Olifaunt.

Furthermore, we are told that the elf-queen is "With harpe and pipe and symphonie, / Dwellynge in this place'" (7.811-16). The description of this setting echoes that of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, for the Wife's elf-queen dances with her company (3.859-61). Although dancing is not mentioned in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, nonetheless we are given the impression that the elf-queen lives in comfort rather than constraint, and the word "dwellynge" suggests a place of some permanence, typically associated with the home. Of course, provided that the prisoner is of high rank, such captivity may not be a hardship; after all, Meleagant in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* provides the abducted queen with comfortable lodgings. However, in Chrétien's romance, Guinevere clearly desires to be rescued; moments before Kay leads her away from Arthur's court, she whispers under her breath, "'Ah! My friend, if you knew, I think you would never permit / Kay to lead me even a single step away'" (209-11).<sup>75</sup> The elf-queen neither appears (except in Thopas's dream) nor speaks—she gives no indication of needing to be rescued. In addition, the

fight between the hero knight and the menacing giant nearly always takes place within view of the besieged lady. This allows a narrative heightening of fear, for the audience is able to see the reactions of the onlookers when the villain seems to have the upper hand; at the same time, the knight, as is the case with Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*, draws strength from the lady's presence. There is no immediate audience present when Thopas encounters the giant, however, and the giant gives no indication that he will meet Thopas the next day, much less bring the elf-queen with him.

We also know from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* that an elf-queen can quickly disappear if threatened, for when the bachelor knight comes across the elf-queen and her ladies dancing in the forest, immediately "Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where" (3.996). In their place sits the notorious loathly lady, whom others have identified as a fairy.<sup>76</sup> In *Lybeaus*, the Lady of the Il d'Or is also loosely connected with Faeryland, for we are told that she "cowthe more of sorcerye" (1486). Although it is possible that the giant lurking at her doorstep is merely a test to ascertain the merit of errant knights, it seems unlikely given the narrator's assurance that the giant Maugys "Her hap be-leyde abowte" (1248). In addition, the Lady of the Il d'Or's magic seems to be only words and music:

She made hym suche melodye

Off all maner mynstralsye

.....

With false lies and fayre

Th[u]s she blered his eye" (1488-95).

Her magic does not seem to be on the same level as that of the elf-queen in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, for she is unable to prevent Guinglain from continuing on his mission and ultimately marrying the Lady of Synadoun. I argue that the Lady of the Il d'Or's magic is quite germane, and it appears to be akin to the same "magic" which keeps Chrétien's Erec at home with his wife, or which keeps Chaucer's Chauntecleer distracted from his ominous dream in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. One of the French sources for this Middle English romance, Renaut de Bâgé's *Le Bel Inconnu*, makes the Lady's fairy origins more definite. For example, this text, which dates from the late twelfth century to the early thirteenth century, describes the Lady of the Il d'Or as a fairy, and once the Fair Unknown has left her to complete his mission to save the Lady of Synadoun, she has the power to compel him to return to her via a dream.<sup>77</sup> However, in *Lybeaus Desconus*, the Lady of the Il d'Or disappears from the text completely once Guinglain continues on his mission to save the Lady of Synadoun. Whatever magical powers this character might have possessed in the French sources, the Middle English version strips entirely.

To return to Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Thopas's fairy woman is in no danger from Sir Olifaunt. What is more likely, then, is that this giant fulfills the function of the Otherworldly guide, for not all club-wielding giants are malicious. In *Ywain and Gawain*, for example, Sir Colgreuance encounters a monstrously foul churl who is "a lathly creature, / For fowl he was out of mesure; / A wonder mace in hand he hade" (247-49). He too is large, "wele more than geant" (258).<sup>78</sup> As is

typical in medieval romance upon encountering such a creature, the hero's first reaction is to prepare to fight; therefore, Colgreunce "frayned him if he wolde fight" (272). However, the churl gives no response until Colgreunce alters his approach, calling the churl "belamy" (278). It is at this point that Colgreunce recognizes the churl not as an enemy who poses a threat to females, but as a guide to adventure, for he then asks the loathly man, "'I the pray of thi kownsayle / Thou teche me to sum mervayle'" (317-18). This meeting is instrumental for the success of the romance, for it is this churl who instructs the knight in the adventure of the golden basin; although Sir Colgreunce fails, he relays the pertinent information to Ywain, who in turn succeeds.

A similar guide appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for the Green Knight who enters Arthur's hall is "On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe" (137).<sup>79</sup> The members of the court immediately recognize his Otherworldly origins, "Forþi for fantoum and fayryze þe folk þere hit demed" (240), and by the end of the poem, we learn that the Green Knight's Otherworldly appearance has been crafted by the "myzt of Morgne la Faye, . . . / And koyntyse of clergy" (2446-47). Morgan's appellation of "la Faye" marks her Otherworldly nature, and Bertilak's confession of her magic confirms it. Thus we see that not all large and ugly sentient creatures are malevolent in nature, but can also serve at the whim of elf queens such as Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the fairy queen of *Sir Thopas*.

More importantly, the reaction of the hero to such creatures reflects his worth. That is, Colgreunce and Gawain recognize the Otherworldly guide and treat him



with courtesy, which is then returned with information regarding further adventures. In fact, Gawain always approaches such a situation calmly, carefully considering the motivations of his opponent before acting hastily; in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur himself has seized the Green Knight's axe in anger before Gawain acts with reason. In Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, when Gawain and Kay come across an entranced Percival (he is transfixed by drops of blood on the snow, which remind him of his beloved), Gawain (unlike Kay, who charges Percival and is injured as a result) realizes that a knight might have a motive other than impudence for not responding to their salutations. Therefore, he approaches Perceval slowly, and courteously breaks the latter's line of vision. Likewise, when the rustic Percival meets a group of shining knights for the first time in his young life in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, his first impulse is to threaten the newcomers unless they identify themselves immediately. We are told that Gawain "was meke and mylde / And softe to answare" whereas Kay treats Percival rudely, nearly provoking the latter to violence (291-92). As a result of Gawain's diplomatic approach, a fight is averted and Percival learns of Arthur's court, thereby prompting him to start on his journey to virtuous knighthood.

But in Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, when the giant attempts (albeit brusquely) to guide Thopas, saying "'But if thou prike out of myn haunt, / Anon I sle thy steede / With mace,'" Thopas's response reveals his lack of merit, for fighting is the only option that he considers possible. Furthermore, although he determines to fight the giant, at the present moment, Thopas lacks his armor. Upon escaping "sire Olifaunt," Thopas imagines that he fights on behalf of his beloved, the fairy queen, for as he

tells his men, “nedes moste he fighte / With a geaunt with hevedes three, / For paramour...” (7.841-43). Suddenly the giant (who earlier is described merely as tall) has grown two extra heads, and the fairy queen herself has become the stake. Thus Thopas’s response to the giant indicates his inability to read correctly the situations in which he finds himself, for he sees the giant only as a threat (even though he is not) and wants only to fight him, whereas Gawain and other knights know to treat such a character courteously. In other words, the giant tries to prevent this medieval Actaeon from spying upon the bathing Artemis, for Sir Thopas, unlike Gawain, Perceval, and other well-established knights of the Round Table, has not earned the right to be in the elf-queen’s presence.<sup>80</sup> Had he proved himself worthy, she would have come to him.

#### VI. The Prowess (?) of Sir Thopas

Although Gawain and Thopas share a connection (albeit inadvertent on Thopas’s part) to the Otherworld, the similarities end there. Due to his high demand among the ladies, Gawain constantly embarks on quests to save damsels in distress. Therefore, we expect Thopas to meet with a number of women clamoring for his aid; after all, any time that Gawain sets out on a quest, he typically encounters at least one female character along the way. Whereas women flock to knights such as Gawain, Thopas’s magnetism appears to be merely in name, for he encounters only men on his quest: “in that contree was ther noon / That to him durste ride or goon, / Neither wyf

ne childe” (7.804-06). The narrator attempts to account for this dearth of female companions by quickly assuring the audience that our knight “was chaast and no lechour” (7.745); however, as mentioned earlier, even the fairy queen, who surely is aware of his approach, does not seek him out, a detail which suggests that his dream is not a vision sent by the fairy queen, but rather simply a male fantasy. In fact, the closest that Thopas comes to interacting with the fair sex is only in his dreams when he learns of the elf-queen. Yet from this point on, Thopas determines that he will have her, “For in this world no woman is / Worthy to be my make / In towne; / Alle othere wommen I forsake” (7.791-94). Surely Thopas must be a doughty knight indeed if he can aim so high as a fairy mistress!

Chaucer opens his tale with the comment that his knight is “fair and gent / In bataille and in tourneyment” (7.715-16). J.A. Burrow indicates some difficulty in determining the exact meaning of “gent” in the explanatory notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, suggesting that the adjective has become cliché through use and may possibly mean “elegant.”<sup>81</sup> Building on this possible definition, Burrow states that the adjective “gent” seems out of place here, for one’s elegance in battle does not necessarily indicate their success. The *MED* expands the possible meanings of this word, indicating that “gent” can describe either the body, meaning “beautiful, graceful, or shapely,” or it can refer to one’s speech;<sup>82</sup> thus Chaucer the pilgrim’s word choice here is surprising, as neither appearance nor language ability relates to one’s ability to fight with the weapons typically attributed to the medieval knight. In *Sir Perceval of Galles*, for example, we are told at the very beginning that Percival is

“faire and fre / And fell in his fighte” (3-4)—these adjectives, particularly “fell,” give us a much better indication of what this knight is like on the battlefield—he is fierce in combat. In addition, other romances establish the prowess of their hero through concrete descriptions of the deeds as they are completed or through secondhand reports from reliable eyewitnesses. For example, in *Sir Launfal*, Launfal’s worth is clearly established long before his fairy mistress appears. First, his generosity leads to promotion: “For hys largesse and hys bounté, / Þe kynges steward made was he” (31-32). Second, his fellow knights speak highly of him: “Moche worchyp and greet honour / To Gonnore þe Quene and Kyng Artoure / Of Syr Launfal þey telde” (163-65).

Others have commented at length on Thopas’s place of origin (after all, what mighty knights have come from Flanders?), as well as his effeminate appearance, so I will not address those issues here.<sup>83</sup> But setting these two potentially negative characteristics aside, it is important to note that we are given no further reports of Thopas’s competence. The narrative concentrates on Thopas’s wandering through the countryside as he causes his horse’s sides to bleed needlessly while listening to the singing birds; he has fallen into the conventional love-longing meditation. What is most striking, though, is Thopas’s behavior when he comes across the giant, and it is at this point that Thopas departs from the pattern of heroic behavior established by medieval romance. The latter has provided fair warning to the knight errant to depart immediately so as to not disturb the elf-queen; however, as discussed above, Thopas fails to recognize the giant’s attempts to instruct him, and offers a threat of his own.

Yet Thopas is not prepared to fulfill his threat, for he tells the giant that “Tomorwe wol I meete with thee, / Whan I have myn armoure” (7.818-19). Here we have a knight who has set out for adventure, but has left the trappings of the knight errant conveniently at home. This is in sharp contrast to Gawain who, upon encountering a white doe in Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*, immediately expects it to lead him to adventures. In order to be prepared for whatever he might face, then, he quickly exchanges his palfrey for a war-horse and lance before he sets out in pursuit.<sup>84</sup>

Likewise, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, when Gawain prepares to leave Arthur’s court to fulfill his obligation to the Green Knight, we are treated to a lengthy arming scene. As he wanders northward, signaling his departure from civilization, his preparation is rewarded as he encounters several fierce beasts. In Chaucer’s tale, although Thopas meets with no foes (beyond the wild “bukke and hare” [7.756]) until his encounter with the giant, he is traveling in a northward direction—yet he fails to don the requisite armor. When, on the following day, at last he is fully armed and prepared to meet the giant, he assures his men “How that the geaunt shal be deed” (7.839); however, considering his previous behavior, it is difficult to place any confidence in his boast.

Of course, until he meets with the giant, Thopas has not had a need for weapons. Although he passes through forests where “Therinne is many a wilde best” (7.755), Thopas encounters no dangers. This is in sharp contrast to Gawain’s journey to the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

Mony klyf he ouerclambe in contrayez straunge,

Fer floten fro his frendez fremedly he rydez.

At vche warpe oþer water þer þe wy3e passed

He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,

And þat so foule and so felle þat fe3t hym byhode. (713-17)

Although both Thopas and Gawain experience great fatigue during their journeys, Thopas's exhaustion is laughable when placed next to that of Gawain. At nearly every step, Gawain must deal with severe terrain, vastly unlike the "stile and stoon" which Thopas must cross over on his way to Fairyland (7.798). In addition, while Thopas meets with no one until Sir Olifaunt, Gawain is beset constantly by beasts, wild men, and even giants: "etaynez, þat hym aneledede of þe he3e felle" (723).

According to the *MED*, the verb "anelen" means "to pursue furiously,"<sup>85</sup> suggesting that these giants, unlike Thopas's giant, aggressively threaten Gawain, offering him no recourse but to fight. Sir Olifaunt, on the other hand, offers Thopas an opportunity to amend his trespass into the land of Fairy with his immediate departure. It is no surprise, then, that after such adventures when Gawain at last arrives at Bertilak's residence, his host offers Gawain much needed respite: "'For 3e haf trauayled,' quop þe tulk, 'toven fro ferre, / And syþen waked me with, 3e arn not wel waryst / Nauþer of sostnaunce ne of slepe'" (1093-95). Compare this to the travails of Thopas, who "so wery was / For prikyng on the softe gras" (7.778-79). Merely the act of riding a horse wearies Chaucer's noble knight.

At every step of Thopas's journey, therefore, Thopas increasingly becomes a figure of ridicule when recalled next to Gawain, for unlike the latter, Thopas serves

only his own desires, rather than the needs of others, and consistently misreads the situations in which he finds himself. Gawain, too, may be selfish at times. For example, in the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artus*, when his advances are rebuffed by the lady of Escalot, he responds with anger; when he learns that the lady loves Lancelot (and believes erroneously that Lancelot loves her in return), “he regretted having said what he had to the young woman, for he was afraid that Lancelot would learn of it. But if he could make his peace with her, he would consider himself fortunate” (4.97).<sup>86</sup> The majority of the time, however, Gawain devotes himself to the service of ladies, and even takes the side of the queen against his liege during the episode of the False Guinevere. At no point in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, however, do we hear of Thopas succoring a damsel in distress. Thus through his use of the fairy mistress motif, Chaucer creates a negative contrast between Gawain and Thopas. Whereas Gawain has earned his reputation over centuries of literary tradition, Thopas bears usurped arms, attempting to occupy a position within the framework of chivalry which he cannot fill.

## VII. The Generation Gap

And that brings me to my final point regarding Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*. The two Arthurian texts which Chaucer mentions focus on the younger generation of Arthurian knights, rather than the older generation to which Gawain, Lancelot, and Kay belong. Not only does the ghostly appearance of Gawain call attention to the

Middle English treatment of the Arthurian legend; it also calls our attention to the relationships between the fathers and sons among Arthur's knights. After all, *Sir Perceval of Galles* opens with a portrait of Perceval's father, who is also named Perceval, and who seeks to create his son in his own image, for prior to his premature death, "he wolde his son were gette / In the same wonne" (119-20). Once the elder Perceval is cut down, the younger Perceval must step into his father's shoes, for when the youth enters Arthur's hall, the king immediately thinks of Perceval the elder, wholly ignorant of the familial relationship: "'And thou were wele dighte, / Thou were lyke to a knyghte / That I lovede with all my myghte'" (545-47). In addition, Arthur predicts that the younger Perceval will destroy the Red Knight, for "'The bokes says that he mon / Venge his fader bane'" (567-68). When the father is removed from the picture, eventually Gawain takes up the reins to prevent young Perceval from floundering, thereby becoming a father figure to Perceval. In addition, Guinglain is the natural son of Gawain. Clearly father-son relationships are significant in these romances.

This idea may be extended to the circle of pilgrims framing these tales—specifically the relationship between the Knight and his son, the pilgrim Squire—for not only has the pilgrim Squire invoked the name of Gawain in his tale, but as indicated in the *General Prologue*, he too is associated with love-sickness and birds. That is, "So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale / He sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale" (1.97-98). Likewise, "Thopas fil in love-longynge, / Al whan he herde



the thrustel synge” (7.772-73). In addition, both Thopas and the pilgrim Squire is associated with Flanders, for the latter has served there in a military capacity (1.86).<sup>87</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, while both the Knight and the pilgrim Squire are active in military pursuits, the achievements of the pilgrim Squire pale in comparison to those of his father. Whereas the Knight fights for the greater cause of “cristendom” (1.49), the pilgrim Squire resembles the character of Thopas in his selfish desire to “stonden in his lady grace” (1.88). Furthermore, Thopas’s armor is unlikely to ever see the sort of wear and tear displayed by the pilgrim Knight; it is much easier to imagine that Thopas sorts a tunic similar to that of the Squire, one that is “Embrouded . . . / Al ful of fresshe floures” (1.89-90). Although we are told that the pilgrim Squire has “been somtyme in chyvachie / . . . / And born hym weel” (1.85-87), he lacks the physical evidence of his efforts, much as Thopas sets out for the elf-queen without his armor or an established record of his prowess. Like Thopas, the Squire attempts to present himself as the ideal chivalric knight, but his appearance and lack of substantive deeds belies his true nature. Ultimately, while the Knight embodies the traits that sets Gawain apart in all of his actions, Sir Thopas, and by extension the pilgrim Squire, offers only a pale imitation of such virtue. But perhaps, provided his development is not cut short, as the *Tale of Sir Thopas* is by Harry Bailey, the pilgrim Squire will prove akin to another Arthurian knight, Perceval, who, after stumbling, at last condescends to learn from the various mentors whom he meets along his journey.

<sup>1</sup> “This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste, / And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste” (7.570-71). Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987), cited parenthetically by book and line number in the text.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Caroline Strong, “Sir Thopas and Sir Guy, I,” *Modern Language Notes* 23.3 (March 1908): 73-77, and “Sir Thopas and Sir Guy, II,” *Modern Language Notes* 23.4 (April 1908): 102-106). J.A. Burrow offers yet another source to consider in “Chaucer’s *Sir Thopas* and *La Prise de Nueville*,” *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) 44-55. Francis P. Magoun, Jr. links *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *Libeaus Desconus* in “The Source of Chaucer’s *Rime of Sir Thopas*,” *PMLA* 42.4 (December 1927): 833-44.

<sup>3</sup> Kurtis B. Haas (“Reading Genre Play between the *Shipman’s Tale* and the *Tale of Sir Thopas*,” *Publications of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 5 [1998]: 58-73.) discusses the ways in which Chaucer parodies the generic conventions of romance. Joseph A. Dane (“Genre and Authority: The Eighteenth-Century Creation of Chaucerian Burlesque,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 48.4 [October 1985]: 345-362.) examines Thomas Warton’s reading of *Sir Thopas* and the introduction of the term “parody” into English, and Glenn Wright, in “Modern Inconveniences: Rethinking Parody in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*,” *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 30.3 (October 1997): 167-194, discusses the theoretical framework for parodic genres by looking at Chaucer’s corpus of writing to determine if parody functions as a device or a genre.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980) 381.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Kimbel, “The Narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*,” *ELH* 20.2 (June 1953): 84. R.M. Lumiansky (in “The Meaning of Chaucer’s Prologue to ‘Sir Thopas,’” *Philological Quarterly* 26 [1947]: 313-320.) suggests that Chaucer the pilgrim reveals a mischievous personality (particularly since Harry Bailey describes him as “elvyssh” [7.703] in the prologue to *Sir Thopas*) and that he adopts a mock humility as he indirectly ridicules the Host’s literary sensibilities. Lumiansky’s argument is compelling, but I tend to lean toward Kimbel’s assessment that the tale is less funny if the narrator is intentionally funny (Kimbel 84).

<sup>6</sup> Ann S. Haskell, “Sir Thopas: The Puppet’s Puppet,” *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 253-261. She also argues that Thopas is a puppet of Chaucer the pilgrim.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hahn, “Gawain and popular chivalric romance in Britain,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 231.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, William Calin, *The French tradition and the literature of medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), who notes that “[t]he most important vernacular literature produced in England between 1100 and 1350 was in French; writing in English, up to 1500 and beyond, was bathed in a French ambiance and looked to the French in addition to the Latin for other and inspiration”

(ix). In addition, studies of manuscript circulation via wills indicate a widespread distribution in England of Arthurian texts, as discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> I do not include *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within this grouping of Middle English Arthurian romances, for it far surpasses the likes of *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Launfal*, etc., in terms of its language, theme, and content. A detailed comparison between *Sir Gawain* and the other Middle English romances is beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur K. Moore, "Sir Thopas as Criticism of Fourteenth-century Minstrelsy," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 53 (1954): 532-545. T.L. Burton, "Chaucer's 'Tale of Sir Thopas,'" *Explicator* 40.4 (July 1982): 6.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Hamel, "And Now for Something Completely Different: The Relationship between the *Prioress's Tale* and the *Rime of Sir Thopas*," *Chaucer Review* 14 (1980): 251-59.

<sup>12</sup> Edward R. Haymes, "Chaucer and the English Romance Tradition," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 37.4 (November 1972): 35-43.

<sup>13</sup> Norris Lacy, "The evolution and legacy of French prose romance," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 167.

<sup>14</sup> William Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes," *Gawain: A Casebook*, eds. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 111.

<sup>15</sup> Phillip C. Boardman, "Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain," *Gawain: A Casebook*, eds. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 259.

<sup>16</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Calin 431.

<sup>18</sup> All quotations and translations from Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li Contes del Graal), or Perceval*, ed. Rupert T. Pickens, trans. William W. Kibler (New York: Garland, 1990). "Et li vaslez a pié descent, / Qu'il ne sot a cheval requerre" (2190-91).

<sup>19</sup> "Si li sovint il neporquant / Del prodome qui li aprist / Qu'a son esciant n'oceïst / Chevalier, des que il l'eüst / Conquis et au desore an fust" (2204-08).

<sup>20</sup> In addition, prior to the maiden's arrival, when Guinglain shares a plate with Gawain, we are told that "There was nothing crude about the knight's behavior" ["En lui n'avoit que ensignier"] (103). Once again, in the French version, the hero's initial equality with Gawain is established early so that the former may surpass the latter in his exploits.

<sup>21</sup> "Mesire Gavains est tes pere" (3236).

<sup>22</sup> Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby, "Introduction," *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 6.

<sup>23</sup> Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, 141.

<sup>24</sup> The opening lines of *Sir Perceval of Galles* describe the main character in the following manner: "His righte name was Percyvell, / He was fosterde in the felle, /

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He dranke water of the welle" (5-7). *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 1-76.

<sup>25</sup> *Sir Launfal*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya, Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) 201-262.

<sup>26</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003) 61.

<sup>27</sup> Lori Walters, "The Formation of a Gauvain Cycle in Chantilly Manuscript 472," in *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 159.

<sup>28</sup> Boardman 255.

<sup>29</sup> *The Squire of Low Degree*, in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, ed. Erik Kooper (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis argues that Chaucer had access to this collection of texts, which was produced in the 1330s in London in "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck Manuscript," *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941): 14-33. *Lybeaus Desconus* also appears in this MS.

<sup>31</sup> *King Richard*, in *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, eds David Burnley and Alison Wiggins. National Library of Scotland. 5 July 2003. 11 February 2008. Version 1.1. <<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/>>

<sup>32</sup> Pearsall 20.

<sup>33</sup> Hahn 221, 223.

<sup>34</sup> According to Hahn, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "an alliterative poem whose simultaneous freshness and intricacy place it among the most sophisticated narratives of the Middle Ages" (222).

<sup>35</sup> Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, eds, *Ywain and Gawain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 108.

<sup>36</sup> Boardman 257.

<sup>37</sup> Lee Patterson, "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: The Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 11 (1989): 127.

<sup>38</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Sir Thopas," *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan, Germaine Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941) 516. Joanne A. Charbonneau adds *Sir Orfeo* to this list in "Sir Thopas," *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 2, eds. Robert M. Correale, Mary Hamel (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005) 654; since the representative of Fairyland in that tale is male, I will not be discussing that romance here. One of the earliest sources for *Sir Launfal* is Marie de France's twelfth-century *Lanval*; however, as my argument focuses on how Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* relates to other Middle English romances, I have opted to use *Sir Launfal* in place of *Lanval*, particularly as the details of *Sir Launfal* which are discussed in this chapter are nearly identical to those of *Lanval*; for example, in both romances, the fairy seeks out Lanval to offer her love.

<sup>39</sup> Anonymous, *Thomas Off Erseldoune. The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erseldoune*. EETS, 1875. *Literature Online*. University of Kansas Library. 18 October 2007. <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>>. As Joanne A. Charbonneau has noted, this text has a number of parallels with *Sir Thopas*, including the grey horse and the specific birds (thrushes and parrots) (676).

<sup>40</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Sir Thopas," 489.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed analysis of Gawain's courtesy, see B.J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *Medieval Studies* 9 (1947): 189-228.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Gosman, "The French Background," trans. Wynzen de Vries, in *Companion to Middle English Romance*, eds. Henk Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993) 18.

<sup>43</sup> Friedrich Wolfzettel, "Arthurian Adventure or Quixotic 'Struggle for Life'? A Reading of Some Gauvain Romances in the First Half of the Thirteenth Century," in *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 135.

<sup>44</sup> *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 41-80.

<sup>45</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Sir Thopas," 545.

<sup>46</sup> *Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Whiting 196.

<sup>48</sup> These events unfold in a similar manner in Chrétien's *Yvain*.

<sup>49</sup> Whiting 226.

<sup>50</sup> All quotations of the French Prose *Lancelot* are from Alexandre Micha, ed., *Lancelot: Romance en prose du XIIIe siècle*, 9 vols. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978-82), cited parenthetically by the division and section of the *Lancelot*, and then, following the semicolon, the volume and page number. The translations are from Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993-96), cited parenthetically by volume and page number. This section was translated by Carleton W. Carroll. "la grant aide que vos avés tos jors fete as dames et as damoiseles vos a m'amor donee" (XIV.13; 1.208).

<sup>51</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Sir Thopas," 516.

<sup>52</sup> *Guy of Warwick (couplets)*, in *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, eds. David Burnley and Alison Wiggins. National Library of Scotland. 5 July 2003. 13 February 2008. Version 1.1. <<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/>>

<sup>53</sup> Hue de Rotelande, *The Lyfe of Ipomydon*, ed. Tadahiro Ikegami, Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse. UM Humanities Text Initiative. March 1996. 13 February 2008. <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/Ipomydon>>

<sup>54</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "lechour."

<sup>55</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "chaast."

<sup>56</sup> Whiting 215.

<sup>57</sup> Boardman 257.

<sup>58</sup> Whiting 230. Coolidge Otis Chapman explores the parallels between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* in "Chaucer and the Gawain-Poet: A Conjecture," *Modern Language Notes* 68.8 (December 1953): 521-524. Derek Pearsall notes that the strange knight's entry into Cambyuskan's hall in *The Squire's Tale* is reminiscent of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but does not go so far as to suggest that Chaucer was familiar with this story in "The Squire as Story-Teller," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 34.1 (October 1964): 86. Carter Revard's linguistic analysis suggests that Chaucer and the Pearl poet may have met in Aquitaine in "Was the Pearl Poet in Aquitaine with Chaucer? A Note on Fade, L. 149 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature* 11 (2001): 5-26. In the prologue to *The Parson's Tale*, the pilgrim Parson comments that "'I am a Southren man; / I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre'" (10.42-44); however, this reference to alliterative poetry, as it is spoken by one of Chaucer's creations, does not indicate either a familiarity with or a rejection of works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

<sup>59</sup> In both *Sir Launfal* and Marie de France's *Lanval*, the queen accuses the main character of homosexuality; however, the Middle English version is much less explicit than the French, for Guinevere merely tells Launfal, "'Thou lovyst no woman, ne no woman the – / Thou were worthy forlore!'" (689-90).

<sup>60</sup> Guinglain's connection is disclosed only to the audience at this point; neither Gawain nor Guinglain know of their connection until later in the narrative, when the enchantment surrounding the Lady of Synadoun is broken with a kiss.

<sup>61</sup> Whiting 203.

<sup>62</sup> Whiting 225.

<sup>63</sup> All quotations and translations are from Renaut de Bâgé, *Le Bel Inconnu (Li Biaus Descouneüs; The Fair Unknown)*, ed. Karen Fresco, trans. Colleen P. Donagher (New York: Garland, 1992). "'si te dirai qui est ta mere: / fuis es a Blancemal la Fee'" (3236-37).

<sup>64</sup> "Gavains grant joie en a menee / et bien sot que ese fuis estoit / et que la fee amee avoit" (5234-36).

<sup>65</sup> Occurrences of "fairy" and "elf" and their variations are listed in *The Complete Concordance to the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 1, ed. Akio Oizumi (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1991). In *The Miller's Tale*, the carpenter, upon finding Nicholas in a strange trance, casts a charm: "I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes" (1.3479).

<sup>66</sup> In order to convince her son to put aside his wife, Donegild, the king's mother, changes the letter announcing Custance's delivery of a child: "The mooder was an elf, by aventure" (2.754). In *The Canon Yeoman's Tale*, the narrator uses the term "elvysshe" to describe the art of alchemy twice: "Oure elvysshe craft" (8.751), and "In lernyng of this elvysshe nyce lore" (8.842). Neither of these latter two uses appear particularly negative, though, especially as Benson glosses "elvysshe" as

“strange, mysterious” in his notes to this tale in *The Riverside Chaucer*. In the prologue to the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Harry Bailey uses this same adjective to describe Chaucer the pilgrim: “He semeth elvyssh by his contenance” (7.703).

<sup>67</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, “Sir Thopas,” 897. She also connects Chaucer’s giant to *Guy of Warwick*, particularly since in both *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Guy of Warwick*, the giant swears “by Termagaunt” (535). Joanne A. Charbonneau lists several Middle English romances in which giants appear to test the worth of the hero, including *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, and *Sir Eglamour* (682). As she notes, *Guy* and *Lybeaus* contain the most parallels to *Thopas* in regards to the giant episode.

<sup>68</sup> *Lybeaus Desconus*, ed. M. Mills (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>69</sup> Another giant appears in *Sir Perceval of Galles*, who holds Perceval’s ring (rather than a distressed maiden); however, no physical description is given. In *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, we are told only that a “fowle gyaunt” threatens the land (in *Four Middle English Romances*, ed. Harriet Hudson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006] 524). *Guy of Warwick* features a giant as well, *sans* physical description, but as in the case of *Eglamor*, a kingdom rather than a woman is being threatened. Interestingly, in Renaut de Bâgé’s *Le Bel Inconnu*, a precursor to the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus*, Guinglain is awakened at night by the maiden’s voice before he encounters the red and black giants, whereas the Middle English text has Guinglain alerted to the giants by means of a large fire.

<sup>70</sup> *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, ed. Alison Wiggins (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004).

<sup>71</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “geaunt.”

<sup>72</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “sire.”

<sup>73</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 109-110.

<sup>74</sup> This situation parallels that of Chrétien’s *Yvain*.

<sup>75</sup> “‘Ha! Amis, se le seüssiez, / ja ce croi ne l’otroisiez / que Kex me menast un seul pas” (209-11).

<sup>76</sup> See Esther C. Quinn, “Chaucer’s Arthurian Romance,” *Chaucer Review* 18 (1984): 215.

<sup>77</sup> We have no way of knowing if Chaucer was familiar with Renaut’s text; however, interestingly, when the Fair Unknown is invited into the Maiden of the White Hand’s garden (that is, the Lady of the Il d’Or), the narrator lists some of the same trees, herbs, and singing birds as in Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*. This episode is absent from the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus*.

<sup>78</sup> In light of the name which Chaucer the pilgrim gives to his giant—Olifaunt—it is interesting that the churl of *Yvain and Gawain* has “eres als ane olyfant” (257).

<sup>79</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. J.R.R. Tolkien, E.V. Gordon, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

<sup>80</sup> Ironically, just as the giant denies Thopas the elf-queen, Harry Bailey, by cutting the tale short, also prevents Thopas from accomplishing his dream.

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<sup>81</sup> Burrow 918.n.715. This word may be related to “gentillesse” and could also mean noble; however, considering the overall portrait of the character of Thopas, it seems more fitting to use a clichéd and possibly inappropriate adjective to describe his accomplishments.

<sup>82</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “gent.”

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s “Diminishing Masculinity in Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*,” *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998) 143-55. See also Carroll Camden, Jr., “The Physiognomy of Thopas,” *Review of English Studies* 11.43 (July 1935): 326-30.

<sup>84</sup> Busby 101.

<sup>85</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “anelen.”

<sup>86</sup> “Lors se traist ariere trop esbahis & trop dolans de ce qui lot dit a la damoisele . Car il a paor que lancelet nel sace si tost comme il parlera a la damoisele . Et neporquant sil pooit faire sa pais anchois que lancelet le seust il sen tendroit a bien paie” (6.217).

<sup>87</sup> Either the country of Flanders or its inhabitants are referenced four other times in *The Canterbury Tales*: The Merchant pilgrim sports “Upon his heed a Flaundryssh bever hat” (1.272), while the Pardoner sets his tale in Flanders. The Cook quotes a Flemish saying prior to his tale (“sooth pley, quad pley” [1.4357]). Finally, in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, the narrator mentions the killing of Flemish by Jack Straw (7.3396). Of course, Chaucer the author also had personal ties to Flanders, as his ancestral town of Ipswich was a major exporter of wool to Flanders, as Larry D. Benson notes in his introduction to the *Riverside Chaucer* (xv).



PART II: ARTHURIAN CREATIONS IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES*CHAPTER 6: RAPIST OR *RAPTUS*?GAWAIN AND *THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE*

In 1299, a loathly lady rode into the hall of Edward I of England to demand of the court that they “recover lost territory and end the strife between commons and lords.”<sup>1</sup> These types of scenes are to be expected in medieval texts such as the late fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the fifteenth-century *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*; however, we hardly anticipate green knights or loathly ladies to stride forth from the pages of fantasy into the halls of reality from whence our history issues. Yet the scene described above took place during an interlude at one of Edward I’s Round Tables as two knights costumed as Sir Perceval and Sir Gawain awaited the summons to perform valorous deeds. What is significant about this episode in court history is the choice of subject matter. As early as the late thirteenth century, the motif of the loathly lady coming to challenge knights was alive and well in the courtly world as well as in the courtly literature. Yet while the French and German romances connect the hag with the figure of Perceval, as in Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century *Conte du Graal* and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s thirteenth-century *Parzival*, romances in Middle English link the loathly lady to Sir Gawain instead. For example, both the fifteenth-century analogues *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* present, as their titles suggest, a union of wedlock between Arthur’s foremost knight

and a most foul creature. In each version, the marriage takes place to fulfill an earlier promise; in both, Gawain's courtesy is rewarded by the transformation of his ugly bride into a beauty.

In this chapter, therefore, I will focus on Chaucer's sole Arthurian story—the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. As argued in previous chapters, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer shifts direction, critiquing the attitudes of the clergy, who reject the Arthurian legend, citing its lack of a moral message, and the aristocracy, who use the legend to establish a superficial superiority. Through his invocation of the popular figure of Gawain in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer reveals the flexibility of the Arthurian legend to comment on contemporary issues, as well as its relevance to the fourteenth century. I argue that the Wife rejects the traditional glorification of Gawain in order to recast him as a nameless rapist, stripped of his famous name as punishment for his transgression of female sovereignty. By doing so, the Wife raises the issue of female authorship and its authority, thereby complicating Chaucer the pilgrim's professed role of *compiler* (as opposed to *auctor*) and revealing Chaucer the author's participation in an intricate dialogue about authorship and gender.

## I. Declining Interest in the Arthurian Legend?

Many scholars claim that by the end of the fourteenth century, the Arthurian legend had fallen by the wayside among the English aristocracy. No longer did

Britain's monarchs host elaborate Round Table tournaments, and as noted previously, Richard II sold several Arthurian books which had been inherited from his grandfather Edward III.<sup>2</sup> John Gower, Chaucer's contemporary, devotes a mere nine lines out of approximately 33,000 lines in his *Confessio Amantis* when he offers the story of Tristan as a warning against drunkenness. We have no English equivalent of Chrétien de Troyes, the twelfth-century French author of the *Conte du Graal* and the *Chevalier de la Charrete*, poems which provide the foundation for all Arthurian literature, and no ambitious poet will take up the daunting task of translating the massive thirteenth-century Prose *Lancelot* until Sir Thomas Malory in the late fifteenth century. Scholars frequently attribute this English lack of interest to shifting social values; for example, Edward Donald Kennedy argues that Chaucer probably found the stories of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Iseult morally offensive.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the absence of English Arthurian creations in the fourteenth century, examinations of English wills dating from this time reveal that Arthurian material was being consumed avidly—by both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. For example, Derek Pearsall notes that “lists of books owned by the aristocracy in the fourteenth century [. . .] consist principally of books in French, [and] most are Arthurian romances,”<sup>4</sup> and indicated in Chapter 2, Alison Stone's survey of fourteenth-century English wills reveals that the Prose *Tristan* and the Prose *Lancelot* were among two of the most commonly inherited manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> Felicia Riddy adds that “in the mid-fifteenth [century] the Yorkshire landowner Robert Thornton copied out romances in his own hand, including *Sir Percyvell of Gales* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*”<sup>6</sup>—

surely a laborious task for a member of the gentry to perform were he not interested in the Arthurian legend. Of course, books at this time were *objects d'arte*, and may be have been intended for decoration rather than reading. However, as Muscatine and Calin have shown, the literature of the French tradition was known in fourteenth England as evidenced by the wide range of allusions and influences upon the emerging English literature.

## II. Chaucer's Source(s) for the Loathly Lady

Scholars agree that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* contains three essential elements: the rape scene, the loathly lady, and the question quest; however, none of the analogues contain all three tropes. Yet if we first attempt to identify the nameless knight, then we can find a closer source—Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. Chapter 5 explores in greater detail the extent to which Gawain appears in Middle English literature, for as Keith Busby notes, “it appears to have been impossible to write an Arthurian romance in the Middle Ages without including Gawain.”<sup>7</sup> As discussed above, less than a century prior to the emergence of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the tale of the loathly lady was in the medieval imagination and courts, and she was linked with Gawain and Perceval—the two heroes of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. While a modern audience might think of Lancelot as the best known knight of Arthur's court, Gawain was the most popular during Chaucer's time. In fact, Gawain appears in every Middle English Arthurian romance.

Before I turn to the parallels between Chrétien's story and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, I would like to first discuss briefly previous scholarship regarding potential sources for Chaucer's version of the loathly lady. Scholars have labored to find sources and analogues for the rape which is unique to Chaucer's version. For example, many scholars have commented upon the tale's similarity to the Irish sovereignty tales, particularly *Niall of the Nine Hostages*. Yet Chaucer's tale limits the idea of sovereignty to that between men and women, rather than sovereignty over an entire realm. Margaret Schlauch draws our attention to the medieval ballad *King Henry* which describes the transformation of a hag-wife but lacks the rape scene which presents the dilemma.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Laura Hibbard Loomis notes that a possible analogue is the Breton lay *Sir Degaré*, which offers the opening scene of a princess alone in the woods, who is then raped by a knight from Faeryland.<sup>9</sup> However, Loomis's suggested text lacks the rescuing female inherent in Gower and Chaucer's versions. George R. Coffman argues that the legend of St. Cuthbert might be a possible source because the saint's mother was raped by a king.<sup>10</sup> While this legend could certainly provide some material for Chaucer's tale, the focus on the latter is on the rapist and the victim, and not the ensuing offspring.

Part of the failure to find a close source, I believe, is due to the method of approach to the nameless knight. Esther Quinn argues that the knight rapist falls into a stereotyped view of the court; that the knight is nameless in order to create an "effect [which suggests] that he is not a particular Arthurian knight but any young knight connected with Arthur's court."<sup>11</sup> According to her argument, Chaucer mocks

the Arthurian focus on the hero and his name. Yet the knight is redeemed by the close of the tale, and is rewarded for his actions with a wife who “obeyed hym in every thing / That myghte doon hym plesance or liking” (3.1255-56).<sup>12</sup> If the nameless knight is meant to suggest any knight of Arthur’s court, rather than an isolated case, then the image of Arthur’s court is one where rape is a frequent occurrence and is richly rewarded. A quick glance through the annals of Arthurian literature reveals that while rape does take place, it rarely goes unpunished.

Douglas J. Wurtele offers another interpretation by focusing on the Wife of Bath’s own view of the rapist knight: whereas Arthurian romance portrays both sexes favorably, Alison aims at a more “realistic” view by placing the knight in the most demeaning position she can imagine.<sup>13</sup> In his opinion, the Wife of Bath means to contradict the assumption that the men of Arthurian legend “are devoted to the maintenance of honor and the upholding of noble ideals.”<sup>14</sup> Aaron Steinberg diverges slightly from Wurtele to follow in the footsteps of Charles A. Owen and F.G. Townsend in arguing that the nameless knight is “part of [the Wife of Bath’s] fantasy—a wish fulfillment [...] in which an old woman like the Wife of Bath wins a knight who is handsome and sexually virile.”<sup>15</sup> While these interpretations are compelling, I would argue that they treat the story too narrowly, and overlook the minute details of color which Chaucer weaves into his tapestry. After all, the nameless knight learns of nobility and “gentillesse” from his wise wife, ultimately yielding his own sovereignty: “I put me in youre wise governance” (3.1231). If the Wife of Bath wanted to belittle her knight, she would not allow him the opportunity

to develop and grow as a character. In addition, because the woman in the tale chooses the nameless knight as her husband, were she to choose a dishonorable and ignoble man, the choice would reflect poorly on her, thereby destroying the message of female empowerment that the Wife attempts to express.

Joseph P. Roppolo turns his attention away from the woman and focuses it solely on the knight in the tale, but like others before him, he does not consider the identity of the nameless knight. Instead, Roppolo focuses on the character of the knight and his conversion. Furthermore, Roppolo notes that the knight is morally corrupt—a far cry from the typical knight of the Round Table of Arthur’s realm. The knight is “selfish and lustful, a man easily aroused by surface beauty and determined to satisfy his lusts without consideration to his victim or to himself.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the behavior of the knight is atypical to the Arthurian romances; knight rapists and abductors (such as Meleagant in Chrétien’s *Chevalier de la Charrette*) are often killed for their misdeeds, and Arthur’s queen rebukes errant knights for inappropriate behavior towards women, rather than interceding on their behalf, as Chaucer’s queen does.

A closer analogue than the ones discussed above may be found in John Gower’s *Tale of Florent* in the *Confessio Amantis*, which Gower began writing in 1386. While the success of the knight still hinges upon the aid of the foul creature, here the knight is given a new name, Florent. Gone are the trappings of Arthuriana; we are whisked away to an unidentified land where we follow the knight’s adventures as he seeks the answer to the same question asked of the Wife of Bath’s knight:

“What alle wommen most desire” (1481).<sup>17</sup> However, his quest is not the result of rape; instead, he has killed an enemy in fair combat, and the latter’s relatives now seek vengeance. Scholars believe that Gower was drawing from the same source material as did the later *Marriage* stories of the Gawain romances, but chose to strip his story of all Arthurian references because he had dedicated the *Confessio Amantis* to Richard II, who was not an avid fan of the world of Camelot. For example, Wurtele suggests that “Gower’s source had an Arthurian setting that Gower omitted,” and points out that the uncle/nephew relationship in “The Tale of Florent” echoes that of King Arthur and Gawain.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the Arthurian legend does not factor heavily into Gower’s work, as noted above. There exist two fifteenth-century analogues, the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, which present a union of wedlock between Gawain and a loathly lady. In each version, the marriage takes place to fulfill an earlier promise; however, like the *Tale of Florent*, there is no rape.

When we turn to Geoffrey Chaucer, then, and to his *Canterbury Tales*, specifically the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, we should not be surprised to find the loathly lady motif, for the issue of female sovereignty seems particularly appropriate for the licentious Wife of Bath. As Roppolo notes, the three major analogues previously discussed have a number of common elements: perfect knight, altruistic quest, willing marriage; Chaucer’s version, however, presents a rapist who seeks to save his own life, and is unwilling to marry the Loathly Lady, behaving even ungraciously towards her.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Chaucer diverges from Gower in that he retains the



Arthurian location and instead strips his knight of a name. But it is important to remember that less than a century prior to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the tale of the loathly lady was in the medieval imagination and courts, and that fifty years after Chaucer's *Tales* was published, a version of the story appeared with Gawain at the forefront and no mention of a rape. I argue, as others have before me, that Chaucer was familiar with the Arthurian legend,<sup>20</sup> but as he was writing for the anti-Arthurian court of Richard II, he had to choose his story and narrator carefully. When we compare *The Wife of Bath's Tale* with Gower's *The Tale of Florent*, we find that the changes are numerous and significant; unlike both authors' versions of the tale of Custance, which follow the same outline with only superficial changes, Chaucer makes calculated changes which drastically alter the direction of his story. What I would argue, therefore, is that both Chaucer and Gower drew from a common story—that of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. Furthermore, the nameless knight is Gawain and Chaucer's audience would have recognized this knight as such, even without his illustrious name, due to the amalgamation of defining characteristics.

### III. Naming Chaucer's Nameless Knight as Gawain

Scholars have already noted the similarity between *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and other Gawain romances, particularly *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As Quinn notes, the heroes of both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* avoid beheading over the course of the story, and both tales share a

similar pattern of development: an “act of violence at the beginning leads to the humbled hero at the end.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* contains a number of Arthurian motifs which are not limited to the Gawain romances alone. Quinn argues that Chaucer was “familiar with numerous Arthurian works,” and finds a number of parallels between the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Marie de France’s *Lanval*, and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: these three romances “are set in the days of King Arthur, draw on fairy lore, and are testing romances.”<sup>22</sup> Dolores Warwick Frese, opposing the view offered by Brewer that Chaucer disdained Arthurian romance, notes that two Arthurian themes—the quest and amorous fatality—become transposed as pilgrimage and marriage in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>23</sup>

However, no one to date has suggested that the nameless knight is indeed Gawain. Philip Boardman comes closest when he notes that the knight of Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is “a repetition of Gawain,” but emphasizes that he is not Gawain because “the long speech on ‘gentillesse’ delivered by the hag on their wedding night would seem inappropriate addressed to the English exemplar of courtesy.”<sup>24</sup> Yet as I will discuss in greater detail later, the Wife of Bath, by means of her loathly lady, re-educates her knight by presenting a different perspective on “gentillesse,” or nobility; therefore, what better way to enact a culture-wide revolution than to go directly to the paragon of courtly tradition? The Wife of Bath centers her bourgeois critique and revision of courtesy on Gawain because he is the one most responsible for propagating the very behaviors and attitudes she is denied, by both her estate and her gender. But before I elaborate on the Wife’s critique, I will provide evidence for my

reading of the nameless knight as Gawain. I have already outlined several of the major traits belonging to Gawain via a discussion of Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* in Chapter 5; however, the traits which pertain to this chapter include Gawain's association with courtesy (which I argue becomes translated by the Wife of Bath as "gentillesse"), his adherence to his word, his sexual freedom, his association with a rape story, his close relationship with Queen Guinevere, and finally his association with a fairy mistress.

All of these characteristics are manifest in Chaucer's nameless knight. For example, we find evidence of his loyalty when his year of respite draws to a close, for he does not hesitate to uphold his word: "Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost. / But hoom he gooth; he myghte nat sojourne; / The day was come that homward moste he tourne" (3.986-88). Although he is reluctant to marry the loathly lady, he does so. In addition, the fact that the queen intercedes on his behalf, and the loathly lady chooses to help him on his quest reflects his inner virtue, despite his act of violence against the maiden in the opening lines. More important, however, is his association with courtesy, which in Chaucer's text becomes replaced by "gentillesse," and which the Wife of Bath has taught to him by her loathly lady. According to the *MED*, "courteisie" refers to "refinement of manners; gentlemanly or courteous conduct; courtesy, politeness, etiquette;"<sup>25</sup> not surprisingly, the *MED* lists a similar definition for "gentillesse": although it primarily refers to nobility, this term can also indicate "generosity, kindness, gentleness, graciousness, etc.; also, good breeding."<sup>26</sup> Both words emphasize a particular type of behavior, one which the Wife of Bath feels

Gawain does not quite fully manifest, and one which the Wife argues is a matter of character rather than inheritance. But this major change will be discussed in more detail later. Suffice it to say that the trapping of courtesy, with which Gawain is never without, is indeed present in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

Throughout medieval romance, Gawain's "adventures and love affairs find their way into many others," even he is not the protagonist.<sup>27</sup> These include such texts as the aforementioned *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Ywain and Gawain*, and the Celtic texts of *The Mabinogion*, where he appears as Gwalchmei. In each of these tales, as Whiting notes, "Gawain is the casual, good-natured and well-mannered wooer of almost any available girl. If she acquiesces, good; if not, there is sure to be another pavilion or castle not far ahead."<sup>28</sup> His function in these romances, as explored in the previous chapter, generally "[reveals] the true or false chivalry of the various antagonists who test him."<sup>29</sup> However, the Wife of Bath alters the traditional story of Gawain so that he takes a maiden by force, and his opponent takes the unexpected form of a haggard old woman. But yet his role as touchstone of courtesy remains in that the inner nobility of the loathly lady is revealed through her sermon on "gentillesse." Furthermore, our flower of chivalry must be taught courtesy by one whose appearance belies her qualifications. The implications of these changes will be discussed later.

A number of verbal clues within the *Canterbury Tales* also help to confirm Gawain's presence within *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The appearance of the name "Gawain" has already been discussed in Chapter 4, when the pilgrim Squire invokes

Gawain in order to illustrate the strange knight who enters the hall of Cambyuskan:

“That Gawayn, with his olde curteisye, / Though he were comen ayeyn out of Fairye,  
/ Ne koude hym nat amende with a word” (5.95-97). Two things are important to note here. First, Gawain is linked in Chaucer’s mind with courtesy, which indicates that Chaucer is familiar with the character of Gawain—no other knight is as frequently associated with courtesy as Gawain. While Chaucer’s Arthurian references in his translation of *The Romaunt of the Rose* appear in the original (and Gawain is not among those references), we do not know of the source, if any, for the *Squire’s Tale*; therefore, we may assume that Chaucer chose Gawain for his comparison in order to clearly communicate to his audience the nature of his stranger knight, and had not included him here simply because the original story did so.

Secondly, the Squire notes that Gawain “were comen ayeyn out of Fairye” (5.96). As explored in Chapter 5, and according to Whiting, “Gawain’s original mistress was a fairy, queen of the other world, and nameless.”<sup>30</sup> The Squire’s repetition of this traditional lore further emphasizes a familiarity with the Arthurian legend, particularly as it concerns Gawain. When we return to the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, there are several indicators that the loathly lady is a denizen of the Otherworld. We are told in the opening of the Wife’s tale, for example, that “The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye / Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede” (3.860-61). She is identified with the forest, the color green, and dancing. As the dejected nameless knight prepares to return to Arthur’s court, he finds himself in a forest “Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go / Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo” (3.991-92).

Indeed, we can only assume that this group of twenty-four ladies dancing is that “joly compaignye” of the elf-queen to which we were introduced at the beginning of the tale. The fairy nature is further established when the knight approaches: “But certainly, er he cam fully there, / Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where” (3.995-96). However, one remains: “No creature saugh he that bar lyf, / Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf” (3.997-98). Once again, we have forest imagery, dancing, and the color green.

If we jump forward in time to the fifteenth-century Gawain romances, however, the loathly lady is not a queen of Fairy. Instead, she is a victim of a cruel stepmother. For example, following her transformation from beast into beauty in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, Gawain explains to King Arthur “Howe forshapen she was with her stepmoder / Tylle a knight had holpen her again” (773-74).<sup>31</sup> If we look to Gower’s *Tale of Florent*, we find a similar version; the former loathly lady tells her beau “That my Stepmoder for an hate, / [...] / Forschop me, til I hadde wonne / The love and sovereynete / of a valorous knight (1.1844-47). In addition, Gower omits all references to Fairyland in the opening of his tale, preferring realistic details while retaining the “days of old” motif. Clearly, Chaucer intends something different by his loathly lady, for when she is granted sovereignty by the nameless knight, we are given no explanation for her miraculous transformation. We can only assume, therefore, that the power to change her appearance lies within her own power, and has not been imposed upon her by another.

In addition, other scholars have identified the loathly lady as a fairy. For example, Quinn argues “that the violated maiden was a fairy, who reappears at the “olde wyf” at the opportune moment to save the hero’s life.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, this motif is common to a number of Arthurian (and non-Arthurian) romances. However, other Arthurian knights are linked with fairy women—not just Gawain. For example, the hero of Marie de France’s *Lanval* and the anonymous Middle English *Sir Launfal* is saved from certain death by his fairy mistress, and Chapter 5 explores other appearances of this motif. Furthermore, Lancelot has been raised by the Lady of the Lake, and Owein’s wife gives every indication of being from the otherworld. We must look at the other links between the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the rest of *The Canterbury Tales* to further establish that the nameless knight is indeed Gawain the courteous, and that the loathly lady is indeed his fairy mistress.

When we are first introduced to the nameless knight in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, we are told that “And so bifel that this kyng Arthour / Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor” (3.882-83). The phrase “lusty bachelor” is very important. While the term “bachelor” indicates simply a young knight, and may be applied to Gawain as readily as any other knight, the modifier “lusty” helps to narrow the playing field. According to Benson, the word “lusty” has a variety of meanings, including “pleasing”, “full of vigor, lively”, “eager”, “cheerful”, and “admirable, fine.”<sup>33</sup> Each one of these definitions is applicable to Gawain. As Whiting notes, Gawain “offered his love generously and spontaneously, and it was usually accepted with an enthusiasm which matched his own.”<sup>34</sup> He has a reputation for “lusty” behavior, because “[w]omen

expect him to make love to them and [...] become doubtful of his identity if he fails to make an amorous gesture.”<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, the phrase “lusty bachelor” appears in Chaucer’s works a total of three times—and all can be found within the *Canterbury Tales*. In the *Manciple’s Tale*, we are told of Phoebus that “He was the mooste lusty bachiler / In al this world, and eek the beste archer” (9.107-08). Naturally, Phoebus has a reputation for pursuing women who catch his eye; however, the connection created by the verbal echo of “lusty bachelor” is striking when we consider Gawain’s lusty nature and his solar origins. A number of texts which predate Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* illustrate that “his strength waxes and wanes during the day in a fashion to suggest some connection with the sun.”<sup>36</sup> When Chaucer refers to Phoebus in this manner, therefore, he indirectly calls to mind the character of Gawain.

In addition, “lusty bachelor” is the exact phrase used to describe the Squire in the General Prologue. We are told of the knight that “With hym ther was his sone, a yong SQUIER, / A lovyere and a lusty bacheler, / With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse” (1.79-81). Remember that the Squire is the only pilgrim who references Gawain specifically, and as I argued in Chapter 4, the Squire seeks (albeit unsuccessfully) to model himself after Gawain. While I am not arguing here for a new ordering to the tales, it is interesting to note that according to Benson, in some manuscripts, the *Squire’s Tale* appears immediately before the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*.<sup>37</sup> It may be that the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* was envisioned, either by Chaucer at an early stage or by a compiler, as a response to the *Squire’s Tale*. Regardless of the order of



the tales, however, the fact remains that a chain of verbal echoes links the Squire's reference to Gawain with the *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

Yet there are other clues which further establish the knight's identity.

Remember that the queen intercedes on the nameless knight's behalf:

But that the queene and other ladyes mo  
 So longe preyeden the kyng of grace  
 Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,  
 And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,  
 To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille. (3.894-98)

The knight has violated Arthur's law and has committed an act of violence against a maiden. Therefore, we expect a suitable punishment to be imposed upon the knight. Norman Holland draws attention to the beheading motif that applies to both the maiden (through her loss of maidenhead) and the knight's intended punishment for his crime.<sup>38</sup> This is, indeed, an eye for an eye. When the queen sues the king for grace, however, we are taken by surprise. Although "Wo was this knyght, and sorwefully he siketh" (3.913), his question quest is a slap on the wrist. But of course, as Quinn notes, the basic paradigm of Arthurian romance is "the development of a knight from youth to maturity."<sup>39</sup> A sudden death would prevent the knight from learning his lesson.

What is significant here is that the queen intercedes on the knight's behalf, indicating that a close relationship exists between the queen and the knight which prompts her to exert so much energy that King Arthur is willing to overturn the law of

the land at her behest. Some scholars account for this act, noting, as Bernard F. Huppé does, that the raped maiden is a peasant woman; therefore, he argues, the queen intercedes to protect the guilty knight because “no lady of noble birth was involved.”<sup>40</sup> By “the ‘statut’ of Arthur’s realm, the young man had committed a crime punishable by death. In the law of the Courts of Love he had committed at the most an indiscretion.”<sup>41</sup> However, there is no indication that the raped maiden is a peasant woman; we are told that “He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn” (3.886). The word “mayde” generally denotes a young girl, usually a virgin. While Chaucer uses this word to signify a servant girl in the *Miller’s Tale*, he also describes the daughter of Virginius in *The Physician’s Tale* as a “mayde” (6.7), indicating her state of sexual purity, rather than her social class. Furthermore, the response to the rape seems inappropriate for a peasant girl. We are told that “For which oppressioun was swich clamour” throughout the land (3.888), yet when other lower class women are taken by force, such as the women of the *Reeve’s Tale*, we do not hear a call for swift and severe punishment. There must be another explanation for the queen’s actions.

Another weakness in Huppé’s argument is the fact that the death sentence hangs over the knight’s head even after his fate is given to the queen to determine; she tells the knight that “‘I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me / What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren’” (3.904-05). If this were indeed a mere “indiscretion” in the Courts of Love, the knight would not fear for his life; instead, the queen cautions the nameless knight to “‘Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren!’” (3.906). If we read the nameless knight as Gawain, however, the queen’s actions

make sense because Gawain and Guinevere have a long history together. In some traditions, such as the Vulgate *Lancelot*, Gawain is even Guinevere's lover.<sup>42</sup> In others, their relationship is intimate yet platonic. For example, in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Gawain summons a messenger to entreat Arthur's presence at the duel with Guiromelant; however, in order to ensue that he has a sizeable showing, Gawain also sends a message to Guinevere:

“Likewise you will say to the queen  
that she must come by the great faith  
we bear one another,  
for she is my lady and my friend;  
.....  
and tell her that for love of me  
she must bring with her all the ladies  
and maidens who are at court that day.” (9076-84)<sup>43</sup>

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we are told that “There gode Gawan watz grayped Gwennore bisyde” (109);<sup>44</sup> their close physical proximity suggests that Gawain has the queen's confidence. If, then, the nameless knight is Gawain, the queen would be most loathe to put her favorite nephew to death. In addition, in the *Suite du Merlin*, Gawain accidentally beheads a woman when she throws herself across the body of her beloved—a later woman rebukes him and orders him to “carry the corpse back to court with the head tied about his neck by its tresses, and submit to whatever the penalty the queen and ladies of the court may impose for his crime.”<sup>45</sup>

Not only does Gawain have a close relationship with Arthur's queen; he also has a history of answering to her rather than to his liege lord, Arthur.

#### IV. Loathly Ladies and Rape Narratives

Neither of the later Gawain romances involving loathly ladies include rape. Of course, Chaucer was intimately familiar with rape, having been accused by Cecilia Chaumpaigne of *raptus*, and many scholars have been at pains to discover what exactly took place. That is, the case may have involved sexual violence or transportation of a person against their will; no evidence has been unearthed to clarify the situation. Nonetheless, the theme of rape as sexual violence frequently occurs throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, both as successful rapes, as in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*, and as thwarted rapes, as in *The Man of Law's Tale*, when God saves Custance from the lecherous man who boards her rudderless ship. But how does the flower of chivalry, the defender of all women, become associated with rape?

A quick survey of a handful of Arthurian texts reveals that Gawain is indeed frequently involved in rape stories. Peggy McCracken notes, "it seems that Gauvain's reputation entitles him to love whether or not it is offered, and if the love he has earned is not freely given, Gauvain takes it by force;"<sup>46</sup> However, we rarely hear of Gawain doing so. Although in the thirteenth-century Prose *Tristan*, "Gawain openly commits rape and murder,"<sup>47</sup> his behavior throughout the Prose *Lancelot* and

the works of Chrétien is typically above reproach. In order to support her claim, McCracken cites the *First Continuation* of Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, where "Gauvain claims to have raped the Demoiselle de Lis" when recounting an adventure to King Arthur and his court.<sup>48</sup> However, as McCracken herself notes, the Demoiselle has heard of Gawain's reputation and during the encounter "abandons her heart and her body to Gauvain."<sup>49</sup> There is no indication of physical violence; only mutual participation. His subsequent reshaping of the events through narrative can be explained as a desire to protect the Demoiselle from her male relatives. In the fifteenth-century Middle English romance *Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, for example, when Gawain is discovered taking his pleasure in the pavilion of a beautiful woman by her father and brothers, Gawain must undergo a series of jousts. Although he is successful in each, when he rides away, the damsel is beaten severely by her father for her willing succumbing to Gawain. If the Demoiselle de Lis had no voice in the matter, at least to the knowledge of the public, then she should not be punished.

Although Gawain alters his retelling of his conquest of the Demoiselle de Lis to suggest a rape, elsewhere he expresses condemnation of such behavior. As Whiting notes, Gawain's "strong disapproval of rape is brought out by an incident in *Li Romans de Claris et Laris*, where he helps to prevent Mordred from raping a maiden. He then lectures Mordred: 'Women cannot defend themselves, and men's duty is to protect them.'"<sup>50</sup> In the Vulgate *Merlin*, Gawain chastises another brother, Agravaing, when the latter expresses a desire to take a maiden by force.<sup>51</sup> As illustrated in the *Perlesvaus* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain does

not always accept a woman's love; if she is married, as the women of the aforementioned stories are, Gawain suppresses his desire in order to avoid a breach of knightly behavior.

Yet perhaps the most significant rape story with which Gawain is associated occurs in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. Within the Gawain episodes of this unfinished work, we have all three elements of Chaucer's Arthurian romance: the loathly lady, the rape scene, and the question quest. First, I will compare Chrétien's hag with that of Chaucer. We are given relatively little description of the loathly lady's appearance in Chaucer; Gower and the later Gawain romances are much more explicit in describing her hideous aspect. When we first come upon her, we are told that the knight "saugh sittynge a wyf – / A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (3.998-99). What does it mean to be foul? Is she foul in speech, or foul in appearance? It is not until several lines later that we are told that it is her appearance: "So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule" (3.1082). However, Chrétien's hag differs from that of Chaucer in that his "loathly lady" is actually a woman who is at all times beautiful; it is her personality which is repulsive.

Like the nameless knight's encounter of the loathly lady of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Gawain in the *Conte du Graal* meets his lady in a green environment which evokes the faery world:

. . . in a garden beneath an elm  
he found a maiden all alone  
gazing in a mirror at her face

and neck, which were whiter than snow. (6634-37)<sup>52</sup>

Her beauty and her placement under an elm tree, as well as her isolation from society suggest an independence often found with faery queens. In *Thomas of Erceldoune*, for example, the hero lays under a tree just before he espies his faery mistress, and in *Sir Orfeo*, Dame Heurodis lays beneath an “ympe-tree,” which has been translated as “grafted tree,” “orchard tree,” and “apple tree,” when the faery king appears to her.<sup>53</sup> However, in the *Conte du Graal*, the lovely lady’s pleasant exterior is shattered when she addresses Gawain, immediately calling him stupid and damning his actions. She agrees to accompany Gawain until ““you [Gawain] encounter in my company / misfortune and grief / and trials and shame and woe”” (6675-77).<sup>54</sup> Later, the loathly lady is described as “the evilest creature in the world” (7216).<sup>55</sup> She is a “spiteful maiden,” “the merciless maiden” (7137, 8331).<sup>56</sup> However, her most frequent title is *male pucele*, or “malevolent maiden.”<sup>57</sup> Although the adjective “male” can mean “evil” or “deadly,” it can also mean “unpleasant” or “disagreeable.”<sup>58</sup> The Middle English term used by Chaucer to describe his corresponding lady—“foule”—has a similar range of meanings, for according to the *MED*, “foule” can refer to a physical lack of cleanliness, that is, “Dirty, filthy, soiled,” or it can refer to one’s lack of virtue: “evil, sinful, wicked.” But yet another possible meaning for “foule” is “harsh or disagreeable (to the ear, to touch).”<sup>59</sup> Thus Chaucer’s loathly lady is cognate with Chrétien’s *male pucele*.

The shift from abstract to physical ugliness may be accounted for by the intended audiences; Chrétien writes for a learned courtly audience, whereas the

fictional Wife of Bath, who has little schooling herself, tells the story to entertain a wide variety of classes on the road to Canterbury. Chrétien's *male pucele* is carefully constructed in that her outer appearance belies the cruelty within. While such subtleties of inner psychology are typical of French romances, we know from English translations and retellings of a variety of stories, not just limited to the Arthurian tales, that the English preferred greater attention to superficial events; the inner workings of the characters are stripped, leaving the motivations to be revealed through action instead. The same thing has happened here. I have no doubt that Chaucer, a masterful storyteller and observer of human nature, understood what Chrétien was doing in his portrait of the *male pucele*; however, the Wife of Bath may not have been able to pick up on such nuances, and many members of her immediate audience would not either.

There are further parallels between Chrétien's malicious lady and Chaucer's loathly lady. When Gawain fetches her palfrey, the people in the field curse her: "“May you go to perdition, / for you’ve never loved a noble man! / You’ve caused many a one to lose / his head”” (6712-15).<sup>60</sup> The motif of beheading cements the two stories together more firmly. If we agree with Quinn's suggestion that the raped maiden in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* is the faery queen herself, then the encounter with each lady becomes a testing motif. The woman uses herself as bait, so to speak, in order to see to see if the corresponding knight can prove himself. The same pattern of development occurs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*. In each case, Gawain is accused falsely—of a general lack of courage in



*Sir Gawain* or of murder in the *Conte du Graal*.<sup>61</sup> The notable exception is Chaucer's version, where he does indeed rape the maiden. The threat of beheading literally hangs over his head. He must travel alone for a length of time, usually close to a year, during which time he searches, either for a particular knight or for an answer. During that time, he comes across a woman who offers him salvation—in the form of a green girdle, an answer, or a challenge. Each woman, however, threatens his sense of duty, and even though he is successful in overcoming the obstacles and enabling the transformation of the women in each version, he is proven to be flawed. Yet despite his lapses from perfection, Gawain is able to atone for his misdeeds.

In addition, the transformation of the loathly lady into a beauty revolves around a bed in both stories. In the *Conte du Graal*, for example, Gawain must undertake the adventure of the Marvelous Bed. After Gawain enters a strange castle, he finds a wondrously attired bed and seeks to lie upon it. As soon as he does so, however, he is magically besieged by bolts and arrows, followed by a ferocious lion. Although profusely wounded, Gawain succeeds where others have failed. What is notable is the behavior of the *male pucele* following this episode. As he has proven his worth as a knight, she gives him one final command as a test—to cross the Perilous Ford. Gawain does so, and when he returns, he finds her transformed:

. . . her heart and feelings had changed,  
 for she greeted him at once  
 and said she had come  
 to beg forgiveness for her wickedness. (8874-77).<sup>62</sup>

Whereas her earlier epithets for Gawain range from the fairly neutral “sir knight” or “vassal” (6647, 6654), to the derogatory “fool” (6681), she now calls him “Dear sir” (8879).<sup>63</sup> The *male pucele* is malicious no more, because Gawain has proven himself worthy through achieving the adventure of the Marvelous Bed, and more importantly, he has shown his submission to her through his leaping of the Perilous Ford. She is free to show her true nature to Gawain, and explains the cause of her previous hostility towards him.

We find a similar transformation in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The nameless knight, once abed, is besieged verbally; the loathly lady challenges his manhood and the virility of Arthur's knights: “Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye? / Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous? / Is every knyght of his so dangerous?” (3.1088-90). He must submit to a lecture on “gentillesse” and is given a difficult choice at its conclusion. His response to the loathly lady's lecture proves that he understands the lesson before him:

“My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,  
 I put me in youre wise governance;  
 Cheseth youreself which may be moost pleasance  
 And moost honour to yow and me also.  
 I do no fors the wheither of the two,  
 For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.” (3.1230-35)

He has proven his loyalty by keeping his word, both to return to Arthur's court with an answer and to marry the loathly lady, and now has yielded himself entirely to the

woman beside him. Like Chrétien's *male pucele*, she can now reveal herself fully, and to the knight's great delight, "she so fair was, and so yong therto" (3.1251). Both women are now beautiful within as well as without, and are entirely submissive to their worthy knights, for Chaucer's lady tells him that "I to yow be also good and trew" (3.1243).

More important than the presence of the loathly lady, though, is the rape story. While there are many more similarities to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than what has been developed already here, it lacks a rape story. However, Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* has one. Soon after Gawain encounters the *male pucele*, he aids a wounded knight, who steals his horse in return. When the stunned Gawain demands an explanation for the wounded knight's actions, the latter replies,

‘Don’t you recall the knight  
you tormented so  
and forced against his will  
to eat for a month with the hounds,  
his hands tied behind his back?’ (7069-73)<sup>64</sup>

Gawain then reveals the deed which prompted such treatment: “‘Are you then Greoreas / who took the damsel by force / and did with her what you would?’ (7076-78).<sup>65</sup> There are several items of note here. First, there is a parallel concerning the rights of maidens, for in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Gawain notes that “‘maidens are protected / in King Arthur's land. / The king has given them safe conduct’” (7080-82);<sup>66</sup> this idea is echoed in the opening lines of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*:

“Wommen may go saufly up and doun.” (3.878). In each version, therefore, we have a guarantee of safe passage granted to women, which is then violated knowingly by a knight of King Arthur’s household.

However, in Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*, Gawain is not the rapist but rather the one who has exacted punishment. When Greoreas complains of Gawain’s judgment, Gawain responds, “I acted in accord with the law / that is established and set / throughout the kingdom” (7087-89).<sup>67</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Gawain is attentive to yet respectful of women; if he is refused, he simply finds another woman on whom to bestow his affections, and he attempts to deter others from inappropriate behavior. When women are sexually violated, or even abducted, as in Chrétien’s *Chevalier de la Charrette*, Gawain is the first to set out after them. Chaucer clearly knows the Arthurian legends and the traditional characteristics of Gawain, as argued in earlier chapters; how, then, do we account for the number of similarities between Arthur’s courteous nephew and Chaucer’s nameless knight, coupled with the marked changes, such as the misidentification of Gawain as the rapist?

An examination of the final parallel element, the question quest, reveals the intent of the Wife of Bath. As noted earlier, Chaucer is much more explicit in his writing than Chrétien; thus the queen in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* articulates the question that will guide the nameless knight, now identified as Gawain, on his path to development and atonement: “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (3.905). As the nameless knight informs the queen a year later, “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in

maistrie hym above” (3.1038-40). The important aspect of this quest is the discovery of female desire for control—over their bodies and in their relationships. While the *male pucele* of Chrétien’s story does not voice a particular question, she does express her desire for control. When she first meets Gawain in the *Conte du Graal*, the *male pucele* tells him that she knows his unspoken thoughts: ““You want / to grab me and carry me down this hill / across your horse’s neck” (6656-58).<sup>68</sup> She is aware of his desire to possess her; however, she rejects such an approach. She repeats her desire for autonomy when she reveals to Gawain the reason for her haughty demeanor towards all knights; it is due to Guiromelant:

“ . . . he caused me great pain  
by killing—I’ll not hide it from you—  
the knight whose sweetheart I was.  
Then he thought he could honor me  
by getting me to love him,  
but this was of no avail,  
for as soon as I was able  
I escaped from him  
and attached myself to the knight  
you stole me away from today.” (8888-97)<sup>69</sup>

Notice the subjects in the passage above. Initially, Guiromelant is the active party; he causes pain, he kills, he thinks; the *male pucele* has no control. However, beginning in line 8894, the subject shifts briefly to an impersonal subject—literally, “as soon as

it was permitted me” (“que il me lut”)—and then allows the *male pucele* to act upon herself (“m’anblai” and “m’asanblai”) in lines 8895 and 8896. Gawain gains possession in the last line; however, she still has the upper hand in their relationship, which sets it apart from that with Guiromelant.

Although the *male pucele* is hostile to Gawain initially, once Gawain overcomes the adventure of the Marvelous Bed and leaps the Perilous Ford, she is won over by his devotion to her wishes. In fact, when Gawain meets Guiromelant and learns that the *male pucele* has lied about having her friend leap into the Perilous Ford daily, he is angry with her; however, he still feels obligated to her, for as he tells Guiromelant, “‘I’ll go directly back / to the wicked damsel / as I have promised her, / rather than incur her wrath’” (8862-65).<sup>70</sup> Thus while there is not a specific question which prompts Gawain’s quest in the *Conte du Graal*, he acts as a result of the *male pucele*’s desire. She has, in effect, been metaphorically raped by Guiromelant, who has forced his unwanted attentions upon her, killed her beloved, and denied her autonomy. Guiromelant himself confirms that he has objectified the *male pucele*, telling Gawain that “‘I loved her against her will / after having taken her from a lover’” (8520-21).<sup>71</sup> As a female, the *male pucele* can only act through another male, in this case, Gawain, and once the latter proves his obedience to her, she rewards him with her own obedience: “‘My lord, I will do your bidding / from beginning to end’” (8924-25).<sup>72</sup> Her behavior is now parallel that of the loathly lady in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* following the nameless knight’s submission to her: “‘And she obeyed hym in every thyng’” (3.1255).

## V. Raping Gawain: The Wife of Bath's *Auctoritas*

We are told in the *General Prologue* that the Wife of Bath is “somdel deaf” (1.446), so it is possible that Chaucer allows her to “get the story wrong.” However, when we consider her skillful use of Biblical and patriarchal matter, it seems unlikely that her retelling of Gawain’s encounter with Chrétien’s *male pucele* resulted from mishearing the story. Let us consider her occupation; as the *General Prologue* notes, she is a weaver: “Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt” (1.447-48). As her prologue to her tale indicates, Alison weaves stories as readily as she weaves cloths, and I argue that she intentionally introduces the changes noted above in order to create anew the character of Gawain and the loathly lady. But would such a female as Chrétien’s *male pucele* appeal to the Wife of Bath? By her own confession, she has been stripped of all autonomy. Her beloved is killed by a man attempting to possess her, and she cannot drive men away with her nasty remarks. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, too, has been a commodity, for as Calin notes, “She trades herself, multiplying profit not children; she sold herself to her first three husbands, and then reached a position of affluence where she could dominate the market.”<sup>73</sup> The Wife of Bath has learned how to play the game sexually, and now, having discovered the power of language, seeks to extend her power through her tale.

Thus Wife of Bath responds by making her heroine physically loathly and at the same time, a source of great wisdom. We also have a much more deliberate articulation of the exchange of power in that the nameless knight “wins” her by granting her sovereignty. Quinn has noted the reversal of power that takes place in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. In the initial episode, we are told of the “wordless subjection of the maiden to the knight’s will,” whereas in the final episode, “the woman establishes her superiority through speech.”<sup>74</sup> Yet I would argue that the Wife of Bath’s changes are more much pervasive and intricate. She does not simply want an exchange of power, nor a fantasy of wish-fulfillment where the old woman gets the virile young knight. If that were the case, she would grant the knight a name. What better way to enhance her own name than to prove that she possesses power over Gawain, the flower of chivalry and most celebrated of Arthur’s knights!

As Whiting notes, Gawain is unique among Arthur’s bevy of knights in that “Gawain does not conceal his name.”<sup>75</sup> Even when doing so is not in his best interest, Gawain never withholds his name—even to his greatest enemies. However, there are exceptions. In Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*, Gawain does go undercover for a while. To the queen at the Castle of the Marvelous Bed, Gawain says, ““But I ask and request a boon of you / . . . / that you not ask my name / for seven days”” (8308-11).<sup>76</sup> However, it is Gawain’s choice to go unrecognized, and he later reveals his name when he is prepared to do so. In fact, when he encounters Guiromelant and learns of the latter’s hatred for Lot and his eldest son, Gawain responds without hesitation: ““my name will never be hidden from you. / I am the one you hate so much, / I am



Gawain’’ (8783-85).<sup>77</sup> A similar situation occurs in the thirteenth-century *L’Atre Périlleux*; following news of his “death,” Gawain is known as *cil sans nom* (“he without a name”) for most of the romance.<sup>78</sup>

Thus the Wife of Bath symbolically rapes Gawain by taking away his name—he becomes controlled textually by the female narrator. Keep in mind the importance of a knight’s name in the Arthurian romances. Numerous knights arrive at Arthur’s hall and remain nameless (either through their choice to withhold their name, as is the case of Gareth, or through ignorance, as is the case with Lancelot and Perceval) until they have achieved magnificent deeds. Without his name and reputation, a knight is nothing; he is a hollow shell. Once a knight loses his name, it is nearly impossible to regain it—just as a violated maiden is unable to regain her virginity. Hahn offers another motivation for the anonymity of Chaucer’s knight, commenting that “the rape of the nameless maiden by the nameless knight [ . . . ] makes clear the decision to detach the entire story from association with the popular hero Gawain as a way of creating a new, autonomous Arthurian romance.”<sup>79</sup> However, the traits which Chaucer, via the Wife of Bath, assigns to his nameless knight discourages such a reading when we consider the extent to which the character of Gawain has pervaded Middle English society, as suggested by material culture. In addition, as Douglas Kelly notes, the medieval art of poetry “teaches how to rewrite by drawing on an earlier work’s potential for new expression.”<sup>80</sup> Indeed, prior to her tale, the Wife establishes her desire to overturn the traditional hierarchy of power, for her reaction to Jankyn’s litany of wicked wives is violent, and upon her “resurrection,” she now

has complete control over her husband: “. . . I hadde gotten unto me, / By maistrie, al the soveraynetee” (3.817-18). By her own account, she desires to enact change over a pre-existing society rather than create an entirely new society.<sup>81</sup>

Under the new “maistrie” of the Wife, this reformed community now responds to violence against women in a nontraditional manner, for part of the Wife’s motivation for punishing Gawain lies in his earlier reactions to rape. That is, when Gawain is given authority over a rapist, the penalty that he imposes is minor. In the case of Greoreas in Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*, Gawain forced the miscreant knight to behave as an animal for one month. There are other examples of similar punishment; the hero of the Middle English *Sir Gowther* must fight for his food with the dogs and is denied human speech after he commits rape and murder. However, he has an alternative identity which allows him to purge his demonic nature and attain once more his human status. Greoreas, on the other hand, gives no indication that he has learned from his previous misbehavior; in fact, his hatred of Gawain confirms that he does not feel that his actions were wrong. Whereas the nameless knight learns from his punishment and atones for his misdeed as best as he is able, Greoreas only becomes more angry and more treacherous. Clearly the punishment levied by Gawain does not fit the crime. In fact, in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, when the loathly lady learns of Gawain’s treatment of Greoreas in his trial, she rebukes Gawain for not exacting a more appropriate punishment. Although Chrétien’s lady does not comment on the situation, both Wolfram and Chaucer’s textual responses via the Wife of Bath indicate that they are not pleased with Gawain’s actions.

Yet of all the knights at hand in Arthur's court, why choose the most celebrated of them all, and the one most famous for his succoring of women? It is this aspect of Gawain's nature that the Wife of Bath envies yet finds repulsive. No one criticizes Gawain for his sexual freedom, and although a wooed woman's brothers may come after him, as in the *Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, they are rarely, if ever, a match for him on the battlefield. On the other hand, the Wife of Bath feels compelled to justify her multiple marriages and lusty nature in her prologue. Although Gawain is popular in medieval Britain, occasional criticisms of him do exist; for example, Gower uses Gawain as a negative example in his *Traitié* for instruction of married lovers: "Gawain, courteous in love but too frivolous: one woman is enough for one man in marriage."<sup>82</sup> Hahn notes that "In the thirteenth century, an anti-matrimonial satire frequently reproduced in university circles (*On Not Taking a Wife*) attached itself to Gawain's name in more than a dozen of the surviving copies."<sup>83</sup> Thus Gawain presents himself as a tempting target for the Wife to domesticate. If she is to be limited to one sexual partner, then so too is Gawain.

When the Wife of Bath rewrites a positive male character as a negative one—thereby becoming the rapist rather than the raped by taking away his name and rendering him powerless—she erases Gawain's identity. This is not the first time that Gawain has suffered a loss of reputation, for as Busby notes, Gawain occasionally loses face due to a breach of etiquette;<sup>84</sup> however, the Wife of Bath's version is unique in that by the conclusion of the story, the nameless knight remains nameless—he does not regain his name. As a consequence, once he is stripped of his name, he

no longer is desired by other women. That is, the Wife of Bath's nameless knight is forever tied to his loathly lady. The later analogues, however, place a time limit on Gawain's time with his newly acquired wife. In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, for example, although the story concludes happily, the narrator mentions that their joy is short-lived: "She lyvyd with Sir Gawen butt yerys five" (820). Despite his grief at her death, Gawain is free to pursue other women and to resume his life as a "lusty bachelor." Chaucer's Wife of Bath, however, makes no such allowance, for in her tale, "thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende" (3.1257)—the nameless knight is forever connected to the loathly lady, as indicated by the pronoun "they" and the genitive determiner "hir."

But not only does the erasure of Gawain's identity result in his isolation from female company; he can no longer rely upon the aristocratic privileges which formerly accrued to him with the mere mention of his name. For example, while most people are already impressed by Gawain's deeds and mannerisms before they learn his name, they are willing to go to new heights to welcome Gawain once his identity is known. For example, in the *Conte du Graal*, when Tiebaut de Tintangel learns that the stranger knight who has championed his younger daughter is Gawain, "his heart was filled with joy" (5594).<sup>85</sup> Others seek out his companionship in order to learn from his example, as shown by when Gawain first meets Perceval, again in the *Conte du Graal*. When they exchange names, we are told that "Perceval was overjoyed / and said: 'My lord, I have heard / good things told of you in many places / and I have been very eager / for the two of us to become acquainted'" (4453-57).<sup>86</sup>

Instead, the Wife of Bath re-educates her Arthurian knight as to what she sees as the true meaning of “gentillesse,” for as the loathly lady tells the nameless knight, ““For gentillesse nys but renomee / Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee / Which is a strange thyng to thy persone”” (3.1159-1161). The nameless knight has been stripped of that which previously has been of the greatest importance to him—his name—and which serves as a record of his ancestry and resultant nobility, as defined by fourteenth-century England. But as the hag reminds him, there is another meaning to “gentillesse” which denies the artificial boundaries of gender and class: ““Thy gentillesse cometh fro God alone”” (3.1162). Whereas Gawain has been concerned with the form of the thing, the Wife of Bath, via the hag, reminds him that his inner nobility comes from within, and not from his name.

But how would the Wife and her revisionary Arthurian tale be received by Chaucer’s audience? Are we to view her, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen suggests, as “the butt of Chaucer’s broad, jolly, ironic humor, or the target of his righteous, Christian, ironic scorn”?<sup>87</sup> Or does the Wife provide a safe distance from which Chaucer can experiment with a new “English” idea of Arthurian romance, one which is not as rigid as its fellows and which allows him to redefine courtliness in a way that may be viewed as threatening to members of the aristocracy? After all, Chaucer has relegated his most radical rewriting of the Arthurian legend to a female narrator, who due to her gender, lacks *auctoritas*, or authority. The Friar does not hesitate to interrupt her monologue, and his response to her claim that she has achieved mastery over her husband is laughter. Yet as Calin notes, “We discover that in Bath a woman

outsmarts and out-talks a series of men, and that on the road to Canterbury the same woman employs scholastic reason to discredit scholasticism; a master of speech, she compels her largely male audience to give heed to what she says, silencing the Friar in the process.”<sup>88</sup> Whereas the Host and other characters do not hesitate to silence narrators whose tales are not pleasing to the pilgrims, as is the case with the pilgrim Squire and Chaucer the pilgrim, the Wife of Bath is allowed, even invited, to continue with her prologue and tale.

Furthermore, Chaucer the pilgrim professes his role as a compiler in *The General Prologue*, which may be interpreted as a rejection of the Wife of Bath’s retelling of the Gawain story. Of course, there is the 1396 “Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton,” in which Chaucer offers *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a humorous authority on the hardships of marriage for men: “The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede / Of this matere that we have on honed” (29-30). However, A.J. Minnis argues that “[a]lthough Chaucer had exploited several aspects of the theory of *compilatio* in several works, in his ‘retracciouns’ he was not prepared to assume the role of the ‘lewd compiler’ to whom no blame could accrue. On the contrary, he takes the blame for the sinful material that he wrote.”<sup>89</sup> To not take the Wife of Bath’s tale seriously would be to dismiss Chaucer as an author. In addition, I would add that Chaucer’s allusion to the Wife of Bath in the “Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton” reveals pride in his work, another indication of ownership.

At the very least, however, we can look at the later analogues for some clue as to the reception of Chaucer’s Gawain. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Gower

removes his version from the Arthurian realm entirely—yet somehow, both *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* identify the hero as Gawain. It is significant that in these two later works, the anonymous knight is split into two characters; Arthur is the knight who must answer the question to save his honor and his life (although there is no rape involved), and Gawain is the one who agrees to marry the hag. That these later anonymous authors choose to remove the rape and to glorify Gawain suggests a widespread revision and resistance to the Wife of Bath's reading. There are several Gawain romances in the later Middle Ages, which indicate that in the English imagination, he was quite the popular character, and usually portrayed in a favorable light, and as Whiting notes, the French "*Lanval* and *Yvain* do not call Gawain courteous, [while the English] *Sir Launfal* and *Ywaine* both do."<sup>90</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Chaucer does not offer an explanation for his loathly lady's initial appearance, and Chrétien attributes his malicious lady's harsh tongue to the anger and frustration that arises from the actions of a male figure. Both of the later analogues, however, trace the source of the initial transformation back to a female figure. In each case, the stepmother, acting out of jealousy, casts a spell upon the unfortunate girl. Might these later analogues be responding directly to the Wife of Bath? After all, in *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, the loathly lady "was clad in redd scarlet" (56). Our Wife of Bath shares a fondness for this color, as we are told that "Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed" and "Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe" (1.456, 1.458). Perhaps, disgruntled with her mistreatment of such a worthy

knight as Gawain, later authors cast her in the role of the loathly lady, destined to wander, repulsed and unloved, until she conformed to society and acknowledged that Gawain was, indeed, the flower of chivalry.



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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hahn, "Introduction," *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 41.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Donald Kennedy, "Gower, Chaucer, and French Prose Arthurian Romance," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993, for 1990): 76.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy 76.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003) 61.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Stones, "Secular manuscript illumination in France," *Medieval Manuscripts and Textual Criticism*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1976) 83-102. Qtd. in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, v. 2. *The Canterbury Tales*, pt. 9, ed. Derek Pearsall (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984) 213.n.4402. William Calin discusses at greater length the distribution of French books in fourteenth-century England in his introduction to *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Felicity Riddy, "Middle English romance: family, marriage, intimacy," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 236.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980) 381.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Schlauch, "The Marital Dilemma in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *PMLA* 61.2 (June 1946): 417.

<sup>9</sup> George R. Coffman, "Another Analogue for the Violation of the Maiden in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" *Modern Language Notes* 59.4 (April 1944): 271.

<sup>10</sup> Coffman 273.

<sup>11</sup> Esther Quinn, "Chaucer's Arthurian Romance," *Chaucer Review* 18 (1984): 215.

<sup>12</sup> Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987), cited parenthetically by book and line number in the text.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas J. Wurtele, "Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Her Distorted Arthurian Motifs," *Arthurian Interpretations* 2 (1987): 58.

<sup>14</sup> Wurtele 58.

<sup>15</sup> F.G. Townsend, "The Wife of Bath's Tale and Her Fantasy of Fulfillment," *College English* 26.3 (December 1964): 191.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph P. Roppolo, "The Converted Knight in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale,'" *College English* 12.5 (February 1951): 266.

<sup>17</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*. Ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Qtd. in Kennedy 58.

<sup>19</sup> Roppolo 265.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Quinn argues that Chaucer was "familiar with numerous Arthurian works" (215).

<sup>21</sup> Quinn 215.

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<sup>22</sup> Quinn 211.

<sup>23</sup> Dolores Warwick Frese, "Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and the Arthurian Tradition: Thematic Transmission / Aesthetic Transpositions," *Actes du 14e Congres International Arthurien*, ed. Charles Foulon, et al. (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 1985) 186.

<sup>24</sup> Phillip C. Boardman, "Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain," *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 264.

<sup>25</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "courteisie."

<sup>26</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "gentillesse."

<sup>27</sup> Whiting 195.

<sup>28</sup> Whiting 203.

<sup>29</sup> "Introduction." *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 3.

<sup>30</sup> Whiting 203.

<sup>31</sup> *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995) 47-70.

<sup>32</sup> Quinn 215.

<sup>33</sup> Benson 1267.

<sup>34</sup> Whiting 197.

<sup>35</sup> Whiting 196.

<sup>36</sup> Whiting 196.

<sup>37</sup> Benson 890.

<sup>38</sup> Norman Holland, "Meaning as Transformation: *The Wife of Bath's Tale*," *College English* 28.4 (January 1967): 282.

<sup>39</sup> Quinn 217.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard F. Huppé, "Rape and Woman's Sovereignty in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Modern Language Notes* 63.6 (June 1948): 379.

<sup>41</sup> Huppe 379.

<sup>42</sup> Whiting 204.

<sup>43</sup> All quotations and translations from Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail (Li Contes del Graal), or Perceval*, ed. Rupert T. Pickens, trans. William W. Kibler (New York: Garland, 1990); cited by line number parenthetically in the text. "Autel diras a la reïne / Qu'ele I vaigne par la grant foi / Qui doit ester antre li et moi, / Que ele est ma dame et m'amie, / . . . / Et les dames et les puceles / Qui a sac ort seront le jor / I amaint por la moie amor" (9076-84).

<sup>44</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed., ed. J.R.R. Tolkien, E.V. Gordon, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

<sup>45</sup> Whiting 199.

<sup>46</sup> Peggy McCracken, "Chaste Subjects: Gender, Heroism, and Desire in the Grail Quest," *Queering the Middle Ages*, eds. Glenn Burger, Steven F. Kruger (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001) 124.

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- <sup>47</sup> Raymond H. Thompson, and Keith Busby, "Introduction," *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 8.
- <sup>48</sup> McCracken 124.
- <sup>49</sup> McCracken 125.
- <sup>50</sup> Whiting 197.
- <sup>51</sup> Whiting 197.
- <sup>52</sup> "Desoz un orme an un prael / Trova une pucele sole / Qui miroit sa face et sag ole / Qui plus estoit blanche que nois" (6634-37).
- <sup>53</sup> *Sir Orfeo*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya, Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1995) 70n.
- <sup>54</sup> "'Que male aventure et pesance / Et diax et honte et mescheance / T'avenist an ma compaignie'" (6675-77).
- <sup>55</sup> "la plus male riens del mont" (7216).
- <sup>56</sup> "la pucele ranponeuse" (7137); "la pucele sanz merci" (8331).
- <sup>57</sup> Some of the textual incidences of this term include lines 7103, 8372, 8416, and 8505.
- <sup>58</sup> Alan Hindley, Frederick W. Langley, and Brian J. Levy, *Old French—English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- <sup>59</sup> *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "foul."
- <sup>60</sup> "'Li tuens cors male aventure ait, / C'onques prodome n'eüs chier! / A maint prodome as fet tranchier / La teste'" (6712-15).
- <sup>61</sup> Gawain does not follow Perceval on the quest for the Grail because he has been charged with murdering the lord of the knight Guinganbresil, and must travel to the court of the King of Escavalon.
- <sup>62</sup> "Si a cuer et talent changié / Que tot maintenant le salue / Et dit qu'ele li est venue / Merci crier do son mesfet" (8874-77).
- <sup>63</sup> "'chevaliers,'" "'vasax,'" "'fos,'" and "'Biau[s] sire'" (6647, 6654, 6681, 8879).
- <sup>64</sup> "'Ne te sovient il de celui / Cui tu feïs si grant ennui / Que tu feïs oltre son pois / Mangier avoec les chiens un mois, / Mains liées derriers le dos?'" (7069-73).
- <sup>65</sup> "'Es tu donc ce, Greoreas, / Qui la dameisele preïs / Par force et ton boen an feïs?'" (7076-78).
- <sup>66</sup> "'Qu'an la terre le roi Artu / Sont puceles acceürees. / Li rois lor a trives donees'" (7080-82).
- <sup>67</sup> "'Que gel fis por leal justice / Qui est establie et asise / Par tote la terre le roi'" (7087-89).
- <sup>68</sup> "'Vos me volez / Prandre et porter ci contreval / Sor le col de vostre cheval'" (6656-58).
- <sup>69</sup> "'... il me fist si grant ennui / Qu'il ocist, nel celerai mie, / Celui a cui g'estoie amie. / Puis me cuida tant d'enor fere / Qu'a s'amor me cuida atraire, / Mes onques rien ne li valut, / Que au plus tost que il me lut / De sa conpeignie m'anblai / Et au chevalier m'asanblai / Cui tu me ras gehui tolue" (8888-97).
- <sup>70</sup> "'Einz que a mauvestié le tiegne / La dameisele felenesse, / Li rendrai ge bien sa promesse, / Si m'an irai tot droit a li'" (8862-65).

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- <sup>71</sup> “... ge l’amoie mau gré suen, / Qu’a un suen ami la toli” (8520-21).
- <sup>72</sup> “Vostre volanté d’outre an outré / Ferai, sire” (8924-25).
- <sup>73</sup> Calin 328.
- <sup>74</sup> Quinn 216.
- <sup>75</sup> Whiting 196.
- <sup>76</sup> “Mes un don vos demant et ruis, / . . . / Que vos mon non ne demandez / Devant set jorz” (8308-11).
- <sup>77</sup> “Mes nons ne vos ert ja celez. / Je sui cil que vos tant haez, / Je sui Gauvains” (8783-85).
- <sup>78</sup> Keith Busby, “*Atre Périlleux*,” *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 931 (New York: Garland, 1996) 23.
- <sup>79</sup> Thomas Hahn, “Gawain and popular chivalric romance in Britain,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 232.
- <sup>80</sup> Douglas Kelly, *The Conspiracy of Allusion: Description, Rewriting, and Authorship from Macrobius to Medieval Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) xiii.
- <sup>81</sup> Calin builds on Muscatine’s discussion of the ways in which the Wife of Bath rejects both clerical and aristocratic authority, as well as Chaucer’s debt to la Vieille of Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* (326-327).
- <sup>82</sup> Whiting 82.
- <sup>83</sup> Hahn 219.
- <sup>84</sup> Keith Busby, “Diverging Traditions of Gauvain in Some of the Later Old French Verse Romances,” *Gawain: A Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 150.
- <sup>85</sup> “Mout fu ses cuers de joie plains” (5594).
- <sup>86</sup> “Percevox mout s’an esjoï / Et dist: ‘Sire, bien ai oï / De vos parler an plusors leus, / Et l’acointance de nos deus / Desirroie mout a avoir” (4453-57)
- <sup>87</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 41.
- <sup>88</sup> Calin 333.
- <sup>89</sup> A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) 208.
- <sup>90</sup> Whiting 224.n.314.

## CONCLUSION

## CHAUCER'S PLACE IN THE ARTHURIAN ANNALS

On July 31, 1485, nearly one hundred years after Geoffrey Chaucer composed the bulk of his writings, William Caxton published an edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, a retelling of the Arthurian narrative based largely on thirteenth-century French romances such as the Prose *Lancelot*, the *Queste del Saint Graal*, and the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artus*. As Christopher Dean notes, "With Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* we come to the most significant re-telling of the story of King Arthur in Middle English."<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the *New Arthurian Encyclopedia* devotes three dense pages to the man and his works, and nearly all Arthurian retellings in English literature since 1485 have drawn upon Malory's vision of the legend. This is a sharp contrast to the three paragraphs devoted to Geoffrey Chaucer's Arthurian contribution in the *Encyclopedia*, the majority of which is devoted to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, with brief mentions of *The Squire's Tale* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

Caxton, who had published two editions of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* prior to his edition of Malory, indicates in his preface to the *Morte d'Arthur* that "[King Arthur] is more spoken of beyonde the see, moo bookes made of his noble actes than there be in Englonde;"<sup>2</sup> such a statement suggests at first, in the eyes of a person who had read *The Canterbury Tales*, that Chaucer's contribution to Arthurian literature is indeed minimal. Therefore, we might be tempted to continue to relegate Chaucer to

the margins of Arthuriana, as Roger Sherman Loomis, H.R. Patch, and Derek Brewer have done. However, we must consider Caxton's authority to make such a statement. That is, would he have been familiar enough with Chaucer to recognize the latter's use of the Arthurian legend?

Although Caxton lauds Chaucer as England's premier author in his proem to the 1484 edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, this does not necessarily indicate his familiarity with the poems themselves. Murray F. Markland shows in his study of fifteenth-century printing practices that "Caxton delegated the actual printing to Wynkyn de Worde and his assistants,"<sup>3</sup> a fact which distances Caxton from an intimate familiarity with Chaucer's text. As N.F. Blake notes regarding the proem, Caxton, "wanting to compose in a high style . . . was forced to borrow widely from the works of previous writers" and "the value of the proem is that, like Caxton's other prologues and epilogues," it shows "how the stock contemporary phrases could be welded together in a literary composition."<sup>4</sup> After all, as William Matthews notes, the "prevailing taste [at court] was Chaucerian,"<sup>5</sup> and if Caxton was indeed the shrewd businessman we believe him to have been, he would have been foolish not to publish an edition of Chaucer's works or to add his own voice to the chorus of praise. In other words, Caxton's comment in his prologue to the *Morte d'Arthur* may be intended to create demand for the Matter of Britain by suggesting that an Arthurian dearth existed in English, and is not necessarily a reflection on the popularity of the legend in England. At the same time, his statement speaks to the continuing interest in the legend, particularly during a time when the number of people able to read

French literature was declining sharply. It may be that during Chaucer's time, so little English Arthurian literature was created simply because the demand for the legend was already met by French versions.

In addition, such a statement as Caxton's remains relative in nature; if, for example, there are one hundred Arthurian stories written in one year in France and only ninety in England during the same amount of time, one can legitimately make the claim that the legend is more popular on the continent. Ninety stories, however, still remains a significant number. After all, Malory did not have to travel to France to obtain his materials for his *Morte d'Arthur*; his prison library held sufficient versions of the legend, in French and in English, and as I discussed in a number of my chapters, particularly in my treatment of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* in Chapter 2, inspections of wills, libraries, and metafictional references to reading practices in English literature reveals that French literature was disseminated widely in England.

While I do not propose that we replace Malory with Chaucer as the most significant contributor of Arthurian literature in English, my study has shown that Chaucer's use of the legend is equally significant and that he merits more than just a brief footnote in the annals of Arthuriana, for many of the "accomplishments" attributed to Malory are present in Chaucer's writing as well. For example, Dean claims of Malory that he is "a moral writer, a man with a lesson to teach. Because it seemed so suitable for his purpose, he turned to the story of the downfall of Arthur and retold it in such a way that its tragedy was strongly brought out and the responsibility for that tragedy clearly identified."<sup>6</sup> Malory takes what he finds in his

sources and adapts it to meet his need to comment on the ills of contemporary society. Yet as Roberta L. Krueger notes, as early as the thirteenth century, such adaptation is not unique to Malory, for “chivalric fiction presented itself less as a panel for the advertisement of social ideals than as a forum for the construction and contestation of social identities and values.”<sup>7</sup>

Chaucer likewise stands upon the backs of his French predecessors, drawing upon their versions of the Arthurian legend and reshaping them as he saw fit. He too recognizes the legend’s capacity for educating its readers about various facets of life, both spiritual and practical. Although as Dean notes, “[Malory] saw the tale as an especially valuable one for teaching lessons about man’s ability to transcend the mundane and create for himself a noble ideal, while at the same time showing the instability in man that would prevent him from living up to the ideal for long once he had attained it,”<sup>8</sup> Chaucer reflects as well the omniscient presence of human frailty in his treatment of the Arthurian legend, for despite the fact that Lancelot and Guinevere live in mortal sin for the majority of their adult lives, their dedication to one another is admirable; even more so is their final repentance and penance when they recognize and accept their greater duty to the state and to God. When Chaucer contrasts these characters with his own creations, he likewise reveals the cause of their own downfall—whether it results in death as in *Troilus and Criseyde* or in the failure to advance socially, as shown by the Nun’s Priest—contrasts which I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.



Chaucer also criticizes his fellow writers of romance for their lack of imagination, for as I argued in Chapter 5, the treatment of Sir Gawain by Middle English romance authors situates him as the pinnacle of achievement. By failing to recognize Gawain's innate flaws or to acknowledge that he may be surpassed by a Lancelot, a symbol of earthly excellence, or a Percival, a symbol of spiritual perfection, the writers of Middle English romances such as *Lybeaus Desconus* or *Sir Perceval of Galles* deviate from their French counterparts and limit the scope of human accomplishment. In many ways, Chaucer paves the way for the later innovations of Edmund Spenser in his *Faerie Queene* or Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, two texts which revolve around the Arthurian narrative while deviating from its traditional strands. That is, *Faerie Queene* offers Prince Arthur as a model for emulation while *Don Quixote* satirizes romance and chivalry, features which appear in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*.

At the same time, Chaucer also reveals the ways in which the Arthurian legend continues to be manipulated for political purposes; just as members of the Tudor dynasty later traced their heritage back to King Arthur to solidify their claims to the thrones, Chaucer's pilgrims use the legend to indicate their place in the social hierarchy as well as to attempt to control others, whether it be through veiled threats of physical violence, as in *The Squire's Tale*, or through negative comments on reading material, as in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Chaucer even touches upon the practical and economic as my discussion of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and her construction of Arthurian identity showed in Chapter 6.

Overall, though, I argue that Chaucer's Arthuriana shows that there is an ever changing dialogue between the major estates of medieval England, and due to the extent of saturation of the Arthurian narrative in England, it becomes the ideal vehicle for Chaucer's social criticisms. There is nothing particularly innovative about a member of the aristocracy such as Sir Thomas Malory taking up the Arthurian legend, for his class typically sets literary trends. However, for Chaucer as a member of the middle class and himself dependent upon the aristocracy for their patronage reveals the growing presence and power of the bourgeois. When we trace the allusions throughout the corpus of Chaucer's writing, we find that although at first he initially mirrors the prevailing courtly dislike of the Arthurian legend, as I argued in Chapter 1, even in his early poems he still retains his own opinions as distinct from that of the court, therefore modifying his allusions to include the Tristan narrative while excluding that of Lancelot. As his writing style matures, so too do his Arthurian connections, for whereas Gower largely restricts his narrative practices to appease his courtly audience, Chaucer subtly defies their limitations for it is with two of his middle class pilgrims—Chaucer the pilgrim and the Wife of Bath—that Chaucer most clearly articulates the Arthurian legend.

Today's American and British audiences typically come to the Matter of Britain through films such as *Camelot*, *Excalibur*, and *Monty Python*, and modern novels such as T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*; all of these examples can trace their lineage back to Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Yet before there was Malory, there was Chaucer, and as

my study illustrates, his use of the Arthurian legend should not be underestimated. While he does not devote large amounts of time to the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, nonetheless, the fact remains that in an environment in which the prevailing authority was indifferent, if not hostile, to the Arthurian legend, Chaucer's writings include allusions to prominent Arthurian characters whereas other authors, including Gower, downplay and even possibly excise such allusions, as in the case of *The Tale of Florent*. Furthermore, Chaucer's exposure to French Arthurian romance significantly influences the shape of *Troilus and Criseyde*. We see most clearly in the *Canterbury Tales* the extent to which the emerging middle class seizes hold of the legend, reshaping it as they see fit, and revealing that the Arthurian legend is far from passé in fourteenth-century England.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Dean, *Arthur of England: English attitudes to King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 91.

<sup>2</sup> William Caxton, "Preface," in *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in William Matthews, "Caxton and Chaucer: A Re-View," in *The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick, and Michael N. Salda (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000) 9.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Matthews 6.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews 2.

<sup>6</sup> Dean 91.

<sup>7</sup> Roberta L. Krueger, "Introduction," *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 5.

<sup>8</sup> Dean 102.

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